

Improving the Relevancy & Effectiveness of the Air Force
Sexual Assault Prevention & Response Program

A Think Tank Project By:

SOS Class 13D Group 2

Submitted to assist Air Force leadership in eliminating
sexual assault from within the ranks
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Introduction

Since its inception in 2005, the Air Force Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR) program has made significant strides in enhancing awareness and victim support; however, further improvements are necessary to make the program more relevant and effective—particularly regarding prevention. The number of Air Force (AF) sexual assault reports has steadily increased, climbing from 546 in FY09, to 570 in FY10, 614 in FY11, and 790 in the recent FY12 annual report.¹ While this 44.7% increase is at least partially due to heightened program awareness and trust in the reporting process, it also indicates that the true scope of the problem has long been larger than many would like to acknowledge.

In the summer of 2010 the Air Force conducted an anonymous Gallup poll to investigate the full extent of the sexual assault problem. The results of this survey provide a glimpse beneath the surface of the issue and are of critical importance in identifying the biggest deficiencies and developing effective corrective courses of action. The poll had 18,834 respondents and it revealed that approximately 18.9% of female and 2.1% of male respondents claim to have been sexually assaulted while in the Air Force.² Even more alarming, it showed that the vast majority of the perpetrators were fellow Airmen. Presently, the SAPR program is in the midst of implementing a tide of changes and new initiatives, some stemming directly from congressional mandates, while others such as the implementation of the Special Victims' Counsel (SVC) program are Air Force initiatives. While each of these changes has value, a culture still exists that allows sexual assault to fester in the Air Force, and this issue must be

¹ Department of Defense, *Department of Defense Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military, Fiscal Year 2012* (Washington, DC: Sexual Assault Prevention and Response, May 2013).

² Darby Miller Steiger et al., *Findings From the 2010 Prevalence/Incidence Survey of Sexual Assault in the Air Force* (Washington, DC: Gallup Government, 2010), 1-108.

addressed through better education, increased leadership and peer involvement, and perpetrator accountability. Correspondingly, when the Gallup poll respondents were asked for their recommendations on how best to address the problem of sexual assault, by far the top two responses were “more consequences for offenders” and “more prevention education”.³ These two concepts harmonize with the three areas that require the most improvement and change from a CGO perspective, including: 1) development of more interactive and discussion-based Sexual Assault education, 2) direct involvement of peers and leadership at all levels, and 3) increased perpetrator accountability while ensuring that convictions are known to deter other potential offenders.

Training Background

Currently, the Air Force SAPR training program lacks standardization and relevance. Undoubtedly, the Air Force has concentrated on improving program management, initial Sexual Assault Response Coordinator (SARC) response, and victim care. While these are certainly critical aspects of a comprehensive SAPR program, sexual assault prevention has seemed to escape a similar level of focus. This is not altogether surprising, as most training initiatives have been delegated to installation SARCs and have therefore lacked consistency. In an attempt to address this issue, Bystander Intervention Training (BIT) was implemented Air Force-wide to train Airmen about how they can intervene and stop a potential sexual assault from occurring. This interactive education is exactly the type of training that is most relevant and effective. Apropos, BIT was the regarded as the most popular type of training since the

³ Darby Miller Steiger et al., *Findings From the 2010 Prevalence/Incidence Survey of Sexual Assault in the Air Force* (Washington, DC: Gallup Government, 2010), 1-108.

inception of the SAPR program in 2005.⁴ However, there was no follow-on or strategic plan to continue and build upon BIT, which means that its long-term benefit to the Air Force may be lost.

Education

The greatest difficulty in defining “more relevant” SAPR training is the complexity of the topic. The sensitive and highly personal nature of sexual assault makes it an extremely complicated problem to address. This section will attempt to describe a more relevant SAPR training program in terms of curriculum and forum. However, before discussing these ideas, one fundamental distinction must be made: workplace discussions regarding SAPR are not “training,” they are *education*. Education, in this context, means increasing one’s awareness of his/her surroundings and broadening one’s perspective regarding personal interaction. It means elevating one’s respect for other people based on a heightened understanding of people’s differing personal boundaries. There are some components of SAPR that can and should involve training, but a majority of communication about SAPR between a SARC or other leader and his audience of Airmen, or among Airmen discussing SAPR on their own, must involve critical thinking – it must be education. To be relevant, that education must be designed with two dimensions in mind: curriculum and forum.

Curriculum

The two parts of SAPR are prevention of sexual assault and response to sexual assault. While it is critical that, if a sexual assault occurs, a victim knows how to obtain help and report the crime, the focus of education should be on awareness and prevention. Relevant initial SAPR

⁴ Department of Defense, *Department of Defense Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military, Fiscal Year 2012* (Washington, DC: Sexual Assault Prevention and Response, May 2013).

education curriculum addresses sexual assault on a personal level with every member of the Air Force. This SAPR education curriculum – ideally part of a series of lessons on the moral foundations of integrity and respect – should be part of Basic Military Training and commissioning source courses. A proposed “initial SAPR education” curriculum is located in the Appendix. Of particular note, this potential curriculum includes the role of alcohol (item IIg) as a specific teaching point. Alcohol is often used as a tool by a predator to incapacitate a victim. It can also function as an accelerator to sexual assault because alcohol in the brain lowers the situational awareness and ability to make good judgment of all individuals participating or involved, including bystanders.⁵ In nearly 50% of sexual assault cases, the victim, perpetrator, or both were under the influence of alcohol to some extent.⁶ This is significant when one recognizes that “victims of sexual assault who had been drinking or using drugs have been found to be less likely to report the assault [to authorities].”⁷

Although necessary, an “initial SAPR education” is not sufficient to keep sexual assault out of the Air Force. In addition to helping new Airmen understand and internalize the Air Force standard of respect and integrity for the first time, sexual assault education must serve two other purposes: (1) continuing SAPR education must maintain an open environment where Airmen are comfortable discussing prevention of sexual assault with their peers and reporting misconduct to leaders; and (2) evolved SAPR education must assist leaders at all levels of the Air Force in making sexual assault prevention a normal, important, and personal practice in their organizations.

⁵ Darby Miller Steiger et al., *Findings From the 2010 Prevalence/Incidence Survey of Sexual Assault in the Air Force* (Gallup Government, 2010), 46.

⁶ Busch-Armendariz, Noël Bridget, Diana M. DiNitto, Holly Bell, and Thomas Bohman, *Sexual Assault Perpetrators' Alcohol and Drug Use: The Likelihood of Concurrent Violence and Post-Sexual Assault Outcomes for Women Victims* (Journal Of Psychoactive Drugs 42, 393, 2010)

⁷ Id.

Continuing education for the force overall should contain SAPR-related information to communicate, such as a review of changes in policy or law, consequences, or support organizations' contact information. It may include personal statements from local commanders and/or updated statistics. However, the focus of continuing education should be on realistic scenarios – preferably through the use of actual (anonymous) case studies. These case studies would be studied through open, guided discussion about how Airmen can personally prevent sexual assault – as a potential victim, potential aggressor, or a third party bystander.

Evolved education for Air Force leaders should focus on how to communicate with one's Airmen about sexual assault. This includes how to set expectations and a zero-tolerance policy while providing an environment where Airmen can still discuss sexual assault, what respect for personal limits looks like, and how to address “borderline behavior” – without fear of retribution.

The medium for administering SAPR education must be face-to-face communication, generally in small groups. SAPR education involves helping people improve their ability to interpret their own and others' signals of personal limits or consent, both verbal and nonverbal. This education cannot occur online with computer-based training or a test. Videos may be used to portray a personal story; for example, the US Navy currently uses a video entitled “Take the Helm” to prompt discussion about the roles of victims, perpetrators, bystanders, and contributing factors.⁸ A pamphlet or business cards may be distributed with key points or contact information. However, these other media are tools to be used by an instructor or mediator during face-to-face training. Above all, SAPR education is about respect – about “humanizing”

⁸ NKO Directions to download Take the Helm-Shipmates video, 30 Nov 2012. <http://www.public.navy.mil/bupers-npc/support/sapr/Documents/NKO%20Directions%20to%20download%20Take%20the%20Helm-Shipmates%20video.pdf>.

interpersonal interactions. One cannot expect to achieve this understanding through a “dehumanizing” tool such as a computer program or a PowerPoint presentation.

Forum

Once the face-to-face education requirement is acknowledged, SAPR educators must foster an open forum for frank discussion among Airmen. One way to implement this is to introduce a periodic case study and associated discussion – similar to how safety investigation board information from an aircraft mishap is communicated within the flying community. A small unit of Airmen comes together in a protected space, studies a recent accident, and then discusses potential causes, contributing factors, and ways the accident might have been prevented. Finally, the Airmen discuss how to apply what they learned from the case study to their own unit’s operations. Details of the mishap studied are not released outside the privileged discussion – this maintains the understanding among aircrew that the priority during a safety investigation is to tell the truth in order to learn from the mishap and to prevent future mishaps.⁹ Similarly, any case studies used as a part of sexual assault curriculum would be fully anonymous and based on publicly available concluded legal proceedings. A safety board discussion emphasizes honesty, trust, and camaraderie while reiterating the inherent risks of complacency/poor judgment, and offering possible solutions for mitigating those risks. These same principles can and should be applied to the problem of sexual assault on a recurring basis.

A discussion about sexual assault should not be separated by gender. This is important for two reasons. First, not all sexual assault victims are female, and not all perpetrators are male. Separating the sexes may isolate potential victims or ignore potential aggressors on “the wrong side” of the conversation. Second, “Airmen” refers to both men and women equally, and in

⁹ AFMAN 91-223, Aviation safety investigations and reports, 2013.

almost all cases male and female Airmen work together on a daily basis. All Airmen can, should and must support each other to prevent sexual assault – regardless of their sex. Protective instincts toward friends and teammates that already exist – in men or women – should be encouraged. Although they make up a majority of sexual assault victims, women should never feel that they are “on their own” to defend themselves against predominantly male aggressors. Both male and female Airmen should be able to recruit wingmen from within their ranks for support. To this end, the majority of SAPR discussions should be separated into peer groups. Peers – Airmen, NCOs, SNCOs – should be able to discuss SAPR together, in order to gain a common understanding as equals who will likely spend time together outside the workplace. Officers should discuss SAPR in the same type of peer-based groups. Initial SAPR education may also be more effective in an environment where the students do not know each other well; individuals are typically more willing to discuss a personal matter in an environment removed from their everyday workplace.

Leadership and Peer Involvement

A robust, relevant, peer-focused SAPR education program is the first step toward ending sexual assault. A strong Air Force SAPR office that uses an effective framework to empower leaders to address sexual assault must support the education program. Leaders must be able to competently address sexual assault at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels. At the strategic level, the Air Force SAPR office should develop doctrine that codifies the overarching principles that the Air Force will use to combat sexual assault. This doctrine should encompass the many domestic issues that impact readiness, such as resiliency, DUIs, mental health, moral standards of behavior, etc. At the operational level, base-level leadership and commanders must be integrated into the solution. The SAPR office should focus on providing these leaders with

the tools and the incentive to develop effective SAPR programs within their organizations. At the tactical level, all Airmen must be internally incentivized to act in ways that promote positive culture change.

The Air Force uses written doctrine to define fundamental principles, guide actions, and influence a wide range of airpower strategy. Sexual assault prevention and response should be no different. Strategic-level principles should encompass the three pillars discussed in this paper: education, peer and leadership involvement, and accountability. From this strategic-level doctrine, the SAPR office should publish a series of best practices to assist commanders and leaders. The Air Force already has a very effective model for documenting best practices within Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures (TTPs); the SAPR office can use this model to develop and document TTPs for effective sexual assault awareness and education.

At the operational level, base-wide leadership, from wing commanders to individual supervisors, must be incentivized to develop and execute effective SAPR programs in their organizations. To incentivize leaders to think critically about sexual assault, the Air Force should require squadron commanders and above to develop a written SAPR discussion plan that moves beyond a standard zero-tolerance policy memo. At a minimum, such a plan should require that feedback sessions include mentoring that reiterates standard principles of moral behavior as they relate to unit's SAPR policies. Each Air Force unit has a unique culture; therefore, it is important that each leader have the latitude to develop a plan distinctive to the individual unit's culture and that leader's style. The plan does not need to be complex or lengthy, but it should be hard-hitting and thoughtful. The desired outcome is leaders who have thought critically about sexual assault and are prepared to effectively combat sexual assault at the operational level. As an example, commanders could extend the potential role of a designated

driver from merely a sober taxi driver to that of a sober decision maker – one who should be able to intervene as a bystander to take care of his or her wingmen. To foster this level of critical thinking, the Air Force must tailor current SAPR education in courses for new Squadron, Group, and Wing Commanders. As such, the recommendation to have commanders and leaders develop written, unit-level SAPR programs could be dovetailed into these courses, whereupon time and resources are included to allow commanders to develop their units' programs. .

Perhaps the most important aspect of changing the Air Force culture is at the tactical level. At the tactical level, the involvement of every Airman is critical to changing culture. Meaningful education is the first step in changing the culture; however, to truly change culture, key informal leaders within an organization must reinforce the values taught in education. Malcolm Gladwell argues that organizations can create change by appropriately incentivizing individuals to be informal leaders.¹⁰ Formal leaders beneath the command level (i.e., flight commanders, individual supervisors, etc.) should produce discussion plans applicable to their portion of the organization that aligns with the unit commander's overarching program. The TTPs discussed above should include ways that these supervisors can start to build internalized respect, trust, and moral thinking into Airmen across the ranks. For young Airmen, it is especially important they understand what sexual assault is and the consequences for breaking the faith of the USAF Airman. The TTPs should also outline policies that have been used successfully to help curb certain types of negative behavior. Reinforcing the idea that taking care of each other is consistent with Air Force values will develop these informal leaders that are needed to combat sexual assault and generate positive culture change.

¹⁰ Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (New York City, NY: Back Bay Books, 2002).

Perpetrator Accountability

While educational efforts must serve as the foundation, accountability of sexual offenders plays an equally important role in the Air Force's sexual assault prevention efforts. However, for principles of accountability and deterrence to make a significant impact, the Air Force must change the way it thinks about sexual assault and the way it approaches discipline. Most sexual assault cases are disposed of in the general court-martial forum. But not all sexual assaults are the same; therefore, a general court-martial may not be necessary, and could potentially be detrimental for certain cases. In some instances, special courts-martial, summary courts-martial, or Article 15s may serve as faster and more effective forms of discipline. These alternative approaches to accountability can be effective and may increase the deterrence associated with discipline.

Research has shown that formal sanctions can deter sexual offenders from committing sexual assaults.¹¹ In a 1992 study conducted on college-aged males, a group of young men were presented with hypothetical scenarios and a collection of survey questions.¹² All of the hypotheticals involved a detailed exchange between a man and a woman culminating in a forced sexual experience. The perceived risk of formal sanctions, such as a report to police or expulsion from school, "had a significant effect on projected sexual assault" and the participants consistently said they were less likely to offend.¹³

Assuming that sexual offenders can be deterred, what system of discipline is appropriate to achieve the maximum amount of deterrence? A tiered system of discipline, with a focus on

¹¹ Ronet Bachman, Raymond Paternoster, & Sally Ward, *The Rationality of Sexual Offending: Testing a Deterrence/Rational Choice Conception of Sexual Assault*, (26 Law & Society Review 343, 1992).

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

ensuring the results of the disciplinary process are accessible and well known, will create the most effective use of the military justice process. The term “sexual assault” encompasses a large range of conduct. The least severe form involves unwanted and/or inappropriate touching of a sexual nature. The most severe includes violent, pre-mediated, or other forcible sexual activity. The vast majority of cases, however, involves sexual activity between these two extremes—often instigated by initial consensual contact and accelerated by peer-pressure, drugs, or alcohol. Within this middle spectrum of cases regarding acquaintance rape or assaults preceded by consensual sexual activity, convictions are difficult to acquire. Research suggests that the jurors’ moral revulsion is lower with cases that begin with consensual sexual activity than to those cases of sexual assault with threats or violence.¹⁴ This, when combined with the presumption of innocence in a criminal trial, makes it difficult for prosecutors to prove the case beyond a reasonable doubt.¹⁵ According to Katherine Baker, in her article *Sex, Shame, and Rape*, “the history of rape prosecutions is replete with illegitimate dismissals of women’s testimony and ridiculous presumptions of consent.”¹⁶ The end result is all too often an acquittal and an offender remaining unpunished. The 2010 Gallup poll shows that only around 16.7% of women and 5.8% of men who claimed to have been assaulted actually reported these assaults, and among these individuals, by far the number one reason for the report was to stop the perpetrator from committing further crimes.¹⁷ Victims must trust that the system will take action when it is truly warranted, and that their reports will not go unheard or the incentive of prevention will be invalidated.

¹⁴ Katherine K. Baker, *Sex, Rape, and Shame* (8 DePaul Journal of Health Care Law 179, 208, 2004).

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ Darby Miller Steiger et al., *Findings From the 2010 Prevalence/Incidence Survey of Sexual Assault in the Air Force* (Washington, DC: Gallup Government, 2010), 1-108.

However, not all sexual assaults are the same. An individual who engages in inappropriate touching does not pose the same risk to society as one who uses violence or calculated incapacitation to achieve non-consensual sex. As such, these different types of offenders should not be treated identically in the military justice system. For situations involving the lowest forms of misconduct, commanders must remain an integral part of the disciplinary system and should be empowered to administer punishment under Article 15 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice, followed by an administrative discharge, if the facts warrant a discharge. This will result in swift punishment, followed by a quick exit from the Air Force by the offender. Within a month or two from the incident, fellow Airmen will see punishment and a discharge. Quicker discipline is often a more effective deterrent to others. Not only will this increase accountability by establishing a method for documenting patterns of inappropriate behavior, but it will also encourage reporting by enabling swifter, more appropriate consequences that will ensure fewer offenders remain unpunished.

For middle-range offenses, special courts-martial, or even summary courts-martial in less egregious situations, should be quickly pursued. While the special and summary courts-martial processes do not happen immediately, they offer discipline more quickly than the general court-martial process.

Furthermore, if more extensive efforts are taken to advertise the results of all disciplinary actions, an increased deterrent effect will be achieved as well. The most powerful tool in the Air Force is peer pressure/scrutiny. This tool is currently being underutilized. The disgrace and shame from one's peers, coupled with appropriate accountability/consequences, can be enough

to deter.¹⁸ In order to increase the awareness of sexual assault and validate the consequences, members of the Air Force must be made readily aware of the outcomes of previous cases in a case-study format. This could be accomplished by annually compiling a report of the most pertinent and relevant cases during the calendar year. A summary of the situation, the allegations, the verdict, and the sentence should be included for each case. This compilation should be published and issued electronically to every service member and would serve to educate and reinforce the impact of accountability throughout the Air Force. Overall, a judicial system that works – and service-wide knowledge that it works – is the only way to truly hold the guilty accountable and to deter future perpetrators. “The consequences have to be known to everyone...the offender can’t be quietly shipped off or it does no good...punishment is only a deterrent if the entire base populace is aware of it.”¹⁹

Conclusion

Sexual assault is not an easy topic to tackle. In the ever-changing environment of the Air Force and due to its close-knit community, leadership is faced with a new challenge that requires a new way of thinking. A culture must be created in which sexual assault is openly discussed and peer pressure has preventative effects. In order to develop this culture, the areas of education, leadership and peer involvement, and perpetrator accountability must be rejuvenated or reinvented. Airmen must know that sexual assault is not tolerated in the Air Force and an environment that fosters mutual trust and respect is necessary to deter and prevent sexual assault.

¹⁸ Katherine K. Baker, *Sex, Rape, and Shame* (8 DePaul Journal of Health Care Law 179, 208, 2004).

¹⁹ Darby Miller Steiger et al., *Findings From the 2010 Prevalence/Incidence Survey of Sexual Assault in the Air Force* (Washington, DC: Gallup Government, 2010), 1-108.

Appendix: Proposed Initial Sexual Assault Education Curriculum

I. Awareness: define AF policy, “sexual assault” and “consent” (AFI36-6001)

- a. Communicate AFI 36-6001 definitions
- b. Discuss interpretation of key words in the definitions (open discussion)
- c. Context: give a current “picture” of sexual assault in the AF/DoD
 - i. Number/percent of victims – reported and estimated unreported cases
 - ii. Number/percent of perpetrators – incl. how many repeat offenders
 - iii. “Typical” cases, perpetrators, or victims: is there such a thing?
- d. Describe the end state: no sexual assault, universal respect for other humans
- e. Make it personal: share statistics*, videos, or case studies; conduct role play or scenarios that focus on communicating and understanding personal limits, competence, and consent

II. Risk reduction (primarily guided discussion)

- a. Concept: anyone can be a victim; anyone can even be an aggressor
- b. Example victim or perpetrator profiles: what can be learned from trends to better recognize a potentially dangerous situation?
- c. Risk reduction as a potential victim
 - i. Having and acting with confidence, pride; a sense of self-worth
 - ii. Knowing one’s own limits and boundaries
 - iii. Discussing with others – have a support structure
 - iv. Personal conviction and willingness to stand up for oneself at any time
 - v. Reporting inappropriate conduct early – including ‘warning signs’
 - vi. May mention physical self-defense, but not as an expectation!
- d. Risk reduction as a potential aggressor:
 - i. Distinguish among predators/opportunists and ignorant people – educating ignorance is easier than rehabilitating a predator
 - ii. Recognizing aggressive tendencies in oneself – don’t be ignorant!
 - iii. Listening to friends and potential partners – respect is paramount.
 - iv. Discussing with others – support structure as another conscience
 - v. Connect to integrity – “if it feels wrong, it probably is”
- e. Risk reduction as a friend or bystander (third party):
 - i. Most important role of the three: objective evaluator
 - ii. Upholding respect for all humans; acting with confidence, pride
 - iii. Being honest with friends – as potential victims or perpetrators
 - iv. Reporting inappropriate exchanges early – including ‘warning signs; “inappropriate” or “unwanted” is as perceived by the victim
- f. Emphasize (1) respect, and (2) as with safety, “it’s everyone’s responsibility”
- g. The role of alcohol (for victims, bystanders, and/or perpetrators)

III. Accountability for perpetrators

(Purpose: deter potential perpetrators; assure others of justice)

- a. Explain spectrum of consequences (see Accountability section)
- b. Make it personal: share examples/case studies

IV. Response for victims – to know for oneself or for helping others

- a. Advantages of reporting (justice; prevent future occurrences)
- b. How to report, and what happens after reporting
 - i. Unrestricted vs. restricted channels
 - ii. Contact information for trained support individuals
- c. Additional benefits for victims (SARC, VA, SVC, ...)

** Statistics are inherently impersonal. However, some statements, e.g., “X people in this room may already be the victim of sexual assault,” can still effectively bring home an otherwise impersonal argument.*

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