

Factors Associated with Unwanted Sexual Contact among Active Duty U.S. Military Service Women

Shauna Stahlman, PhD, MPH; Marjan Javanbakht, PhD, MPH; Susan Cochran, PhD, MS; Alison B. Hamilton, PhD, MPH; Steven Shoptaw, PhD; and Pamina M. Gorbach, DrPH

Background. U.S. military women are exposed to unwanted sexual contact, which can have important implications for physical and mental health. We aimed to explore the factors associated with report of unwanted sexual contact since entering the military.

Methods. Using data from the 2008 Department of Defense Survey of Health Related Behaviors, we employed multiple logistic regression methods to investigate factors associated with self-reported unwanted sexual contact since entering the military among sexually active service women.

Results. The sample included N=6,779 sexually active female military personnel, of which 12.4% reported unwanted sexual contact (includes any touching of genitals) since entering the military. Most women were between 21-25 years (36.8%), identified as White (53.3%) and were of enlisted rank (81.6%). After adjusting for age, race/ethnicity, marital status (including whether or not the spouse was present in the military), and history of unwanted sexual contact (before entering the military), we found that unwanted sexual contact was associated with screening positive for several mental health indicators. In addition, we identified a statistically significant interaction between psychological distress and marital status with report of unwanted sexual contact. Other factors independently associated with unwanted sexual contact included past month binge drinking (AOR=1.29, 95% CI=1.03, 1.63) and past year misuse of tranquilizers/muscle relaxers (AOR=1.58, 95% CI=1.22, 2.04).

Conclusions. Indicators of current mental health status are associated with reports of unwanted sexual contact. Findings support the development of confidential reporting systems for unwanted sexual contact and the need for mental health and substance use interventions.