

Rapid Review of Alcohol-Related Sexual Assault/ Harassment in the Military

Psychological Health Center of Excellence

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REQUEST: The House Armed Services Committee raised concerns that harmful alcohol use persists among active duty personnel and that trends have remained unchanged for years. The PHCoE research team was asked to evaluate the evidence for the co-occurrence of alcohol misuse and sexual assault.

RESEARCH SYNTHESIS OBJECTIVE: Identify and summarize evidence that examines the association of alcohol use and sexual assault/harassment in the U.S. military.

Key Findings

- We identified no studies in the peer-reviewed scientific literature that explicitly examined the association between alcohol use (by a victim or perpetrator) at the time of an incident and sexual assault/harassment in the U.S. military or among veterans.
- Surveillance data from the “2018 Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Active Duty Members” indicated that alcohol use by a victim or alleged offender was a factor in 62% of incidents involving Department of Defense (DoD) women compared to 49% for DoD men (Breslin 2019).
- Most of the civilian research on this topic has involved university and college students.
 - Among college samples, approximately 50% of sexual assaults occurred when the victim, the perpetrator, or both had consumed alcohol, with estimates ranging from 15% to 76% (Howard 2008; Abbey 2001; Nicholson 1998; Gidycz 2007).

Methods

Research questions: Is alcohol use at the time of an event associated with sexual assault/harassment in the U.S. military? What is the prevalence of alcohol-related sexual assault/harassment in the U.S. military?

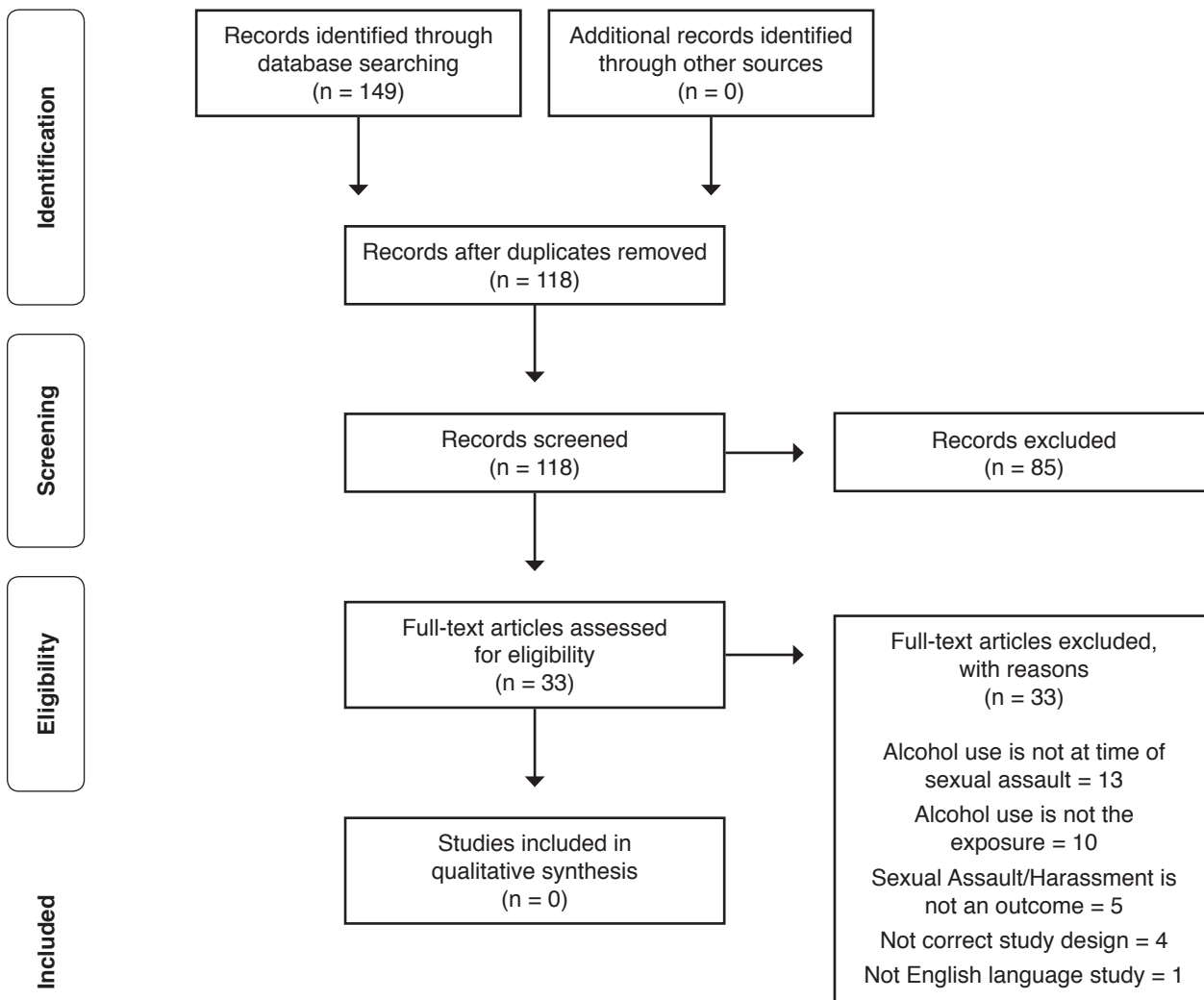
Rapid review: We used established rapid review methodology to evaluate empirical evidence for this research question. A rapid review is an accelerated form of evidence synthesis that provides timely information for decision makers who require short deadlines. Rapid reviews enable production of an expedited report while maintaining methodology that minimizes the introduction of errors and biases. To provide a timely review, limitations are imposed on the scope of the question, the comprehensiveness of the search strategy, the screening and selection of studies, the assessments of evidence quality, and the synthesis of results (please see Appendix A for a description of the methodology used in this review).

Results

Peer-Reviewed Studies Examining Alcohol Use and Sexual Assault/Harassment in the Military

We identified no studies of the U.S. military or veterans that explicitly examined the association of alcohol use (by a victim or perpetrator) at the time of an event and sexual assault/harassment (Figure 1). One of challenges in this field of research is how to operationalize alcohol use. Alcohol researchers have distinguished between *distal*, *proximal*, and *event-level* effects of alcohol (Abbey, 2014). *Distal* measures include questions about general alcohol consumption in the past month or year. *Proximal* measures ask questions about alcohol consumption in dating. *Event level* refers to alcohol use during a sexual assault incident, focusing on a direct relationship between intoxication and sexual aggression. Very little research has examined the role of alcohol consumption during the sexual assault, and we have identified no research that has evaluated event-level association in military Service members.

Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram for Rapid Review Procedure



Surveillance Data

Surveillance data from the “2018 Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Active Duty Members (WGRA)” indicated that alcohol use by a victim or alleged offender was a factor in 62% of incidents involving DoD women compared to 49% for DoD men. The target population for the 2018 WGRA comprised active duty service members from the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force and Coast Guard who were below flag rank and had been on active duty for at least five months. The survey was completed by 115,884 of 735,645 active duty service members sampled, resulting in a weighted response rate of 17%.

Limited Review of Studies Involving Civilian Population

We also conducted a limited review of studies that examined the civilian population. Most civilian research has focused on university and college students; we included this research in our review as this population reflects the age demographic of the majority of active duty military.

Among college samples, approximately 50% of sexual assaults occurred when the victim, the perpetrator, or both had consumed alcohol, with estimates ranging from 15% to 76% (Abbey 1998; Gidycz 2007; Howard 2008, Nicholson 1998). Few college surveys and studies, however, have focused on alcohol consumption at the time of sexual assault (Abbey 2014). One study asked college men on campus about their sexual activity and alcohol consumption at a baseline and then at a three month follow up (Gidycz 2007). Among 110 participants, 55% of sexual assault involving alcohol use was reported by the offender and 50% was reported by the victim. Another study was conducted among 551 university undergraduate students, and found that 14.7% had reported unwanted sexual assault at the time of alcohol consumption (Howard 2008). A third study found that almost half of assaults included alcohol consumption and that it was “common for the woman

and perpetrator” to be drinking alcohol (Abbey 1998). In a fourth study (Nicholson 1998), 76% of unwanted sexual activity reported by females, and 68% reported by males, involved alcohol consumption. Moreover, 72% of unwanted sexual activity admitted by female or male perpetrators involved alcohol consumption.

Conclusion

Very few studies have examined the role of alcohol consumption during sexual assault, with no research identified that was conducted on a military population. DoD Surveillance data indicates that alcohol use by a victim or alleged offender was a factor in 62% of incidents involving DoD women compared to 49% for DoD men.

References

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Appendix A. Rapid Review Methodology

Based on the timeline and needs of the requester, the rapid review methodology included the following:

- A systematic search of two databases: MEDLINE (via PubMed) and EMBASE
- Additional grey literature searching
- English articles only
- Single-person screening of titles/abstracts of potentially included studies
- Dual-person screening of full-text of potentially included studies
- Single-person data abstraction
- No formal assessment of quality
- No quantitative synthesis

Electronic Database Search

Search strategies included both free text and Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) for the concepts of alcohol use, sexual assault and military. Searches were limited to two databases, MEDLINE (via PubMed) and EMBASE. Additional grey literature searching was conducted to identify any relevant reports.

Problem/Question: What is the association between alcohol use and sexual assault/harassment in adults?

| Participants | Exposure | Comparator | Outcome |
|--------------|-------------|----------------|---------------------------|
| Adults | Alcohol use | No alcohol use | Sexual assault/harassment |

Concept #1 – Alcohol Use

| Key Words | MeSH Terms |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alcohol AND (use or consumption or intoxication) [title/abstract] • Alcohol-related [title/abstract] • Alcohol-involved [title/abstract] • Alcohol-induced [title/abstract] • Drug facilitated [title/abstract] • Drinking [title/abstract] | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Alcohol Drinking” exploded • EMTREE – drinking behavior |

Concept #2 – Sexual Assault

| Key Words | MeSH Terms |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sexual aggression* [title/abstract] • sexual assault* [title/abstract] • sexual victimization* [title/abstract] • sexual violence* [title/abstract] • sexual trauma* [title/abstract] • sex offence* [title/abstract] • unwanted sexual contact* [title/abstract] • rape [title/abstract] • sexual harass* [title/abstract] | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Sex Offenses”[Majr] • “Rape”[Mesh] • “Sexual Harassment”[Mesh] • EMTREE – sexual assault (includes rape and harassment) |

Concept #3 – Military

| Key Words | MeSH Terms |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • service member* (title/abstract) • “active duty” (title/abstract) • military (title/abstract) • veteran* (title/abstract) • combat (title/abstract) • war (title/abstract) • “air force” (title/abstract) • army (title/abstract) • “coast guard” (title/abstract) • navy (title/abstract) • armed force* (title/abstract) • reservist* (title/abstract) • “marine corps” (title/abstract) • “national guard” (title/abstract) • soldier* (title/abstract) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Military Personnel (explode) • Veterans (explode) • Emtree – soldier, veteran |

Databases searched

- MEDLINE (via PubMed)
- EMBASE

Grey literature/Hand searching

- Systematic reviews of civilian population
- RAND reports
- Defense Technical Information Center website
- Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office (SAPRO) website

PubMed

((((((((((((alcohol[Title/Abstract]) AND (((use[Title/Abstract]) OR consumption[Title/Abstract]) OR intoxication[Title/Abstract]))) OR “alcohol related”[Title/Abstract]) OR “alcohol involved”[Title/Abstract]) OR “alcohol induced”[Title/Abstract]) OR “drug facilitated”[Title/Abstract]) OR drinking[Title/Abstract]) OR “Alcohol Drinking”[Mesh])) AND (((((((((((sexual aggression*[Title/Abstract]) OR sexual assault*[Title/Abstract]) OR sexual victimization*[Title/Abstract]) OR sexual violence*[Title/Abstract]) OR sexual trauma*[Title/Abstract]) OR sex offence*[Title/Abstract]) OR unwanted sexual contact*[Title/Abstract]) OR rape[Title/Abstract]) OR sexual harass*[Title/Abstract]) OR “Sex Offenses”[Mesh]) OR “Rape”[Mesh]) OR “Sexual Harassment”[Mesh])) AND (((((((((((((((service member*[Title/Abstract]) OR “active duty”[Title/Abstract]) OR military[Title/Abstract]) OR veteran*[Title/Abstract]) OR combat[Title/Abstract]) OR war[Title/Abstract]) OR “air force”[Title/Abstract]) OR army[Title/Abstract]) OR “coast guard”[Title/Abstract]) OR navy[Title/Abstract]) OR armed force*[Title/Abstract]) OR reservist*[Title/Abstract]) OR “marine corps”[Title/Abstract]) OR “national guard”[Title/Abstract]) OR soldier*[Title/Abstract]) OR “Military Personnel”[Mesh]) OR “Veterans”[Mesh]))

EMBASE

- #1 alcohol:ab,ti
- #2 use:ab,ti
- #3 consumption:ab,ti
- #4 intoxication:ab,ti
- #5 #2 OR #3 OR #4
- #6 #1 AND #5
- #7 ‘alcohol related’:ab,ti
- #8 ‘alcohol involved’:ab,ti
- #9 ‘alcohol induced’:ab,ti
- #10 ‘drug facilitated’:ab,ti
- #11 ‘drinking’:ab,ti
- #12 ‘drinking behavior’/exp
- #13 #6 OR #7 OR #8 OR #9 OR #10 OR #11 OR #12
- #14 ‘sexual aggression*’:ab,ti
- #15 ‘sexual assault*’:ab,ti

#16 'sexual victimization*':ab,ti
 #17 'sexual violence*':ab,ti
 #18 'sexual trauma*':ab,ti
 #19 'sex offence*':ab,ti
 #20 'unwanted sexual contact*':ab,ti
 #21 'rape':ab,ti
 #22 'sexual harass*':ab,ti
 #23 'sexual assault'/exp
 #24 #14 OR #15 OR #16 OR #17 OR #18 OR #19 OR #20 OR #21 OR #22 OR #23
 #25 'service member*':ab,ti
 #26 'active duty':ab,ti
 #27 military:ab,ti
 #28 veteran*:ab,ti
 #29 combat:ab,ti
 #30 war:ab,ti
 #31 'air force':ab,ti
 #32 army:ab,ti
 #33 'coast guard':ab,ti
 #34 navy:ab,ti
 #35 'armed force*':ab,ti
 #36 reservist*:ab,ti
 #37 'marine corps':ab,ti
 #38 'national guard':ab,ti
 #39 soldier:ab,ti
 #40 'soldier'/exp
 #41 'veteran'/exp
 #42 #25 OR #26 OR #27 OR #28 OR #29 OR #30 OR #31 OR #32 OR #33 OR #34 OR #35 OR #36 OR #37 OR #38 OR #39 OR #40 OR #41
 #43 #13 AND #24 AND #42

PubMed and EMBASE searches with military concept = 149, 118 after deduplication (31 duplicates)

Records retrieved from the database search (118) were downloaded into bibliographic database software (EndNote). Titles and abstracts were single-person screened by four reviewers according to the following exclusion criteria:

- Not military or veteran study population
- Not peer-reviewed study
- Not English language study
- Not appropriate study design (not cohort, case-control or cross-sectional study)
- Not adults > 17 years
- Alcohol use is not the exposure
- Alcohol use is not at time of sexual assault/harassment
- Sexual assault/harassment is not an outcome
- If drug-facilitated, does not report on alcohol use alone as exposure
- No measure of association or correlation between alcohol use (exposure) and sexual assault/harassment (outcome) or data to enable calculation
- No prevalence of alcohol-related sexual assault/harassment

Full-text articles were obtained for records not excluded (33). No additional article were identified through hand searching.