

# DOD Continuums of Harm

This summary is based on the full-length CNA report, *Racial Extremism in the Military: A Continuum of Harm*, CRM-2021-U-030885-Final.

## Distribution

**Distribution Statement A.** Approved for public release; distribution unlimited. 10/4/2021

This work was performed under Federal Government Contract No. N00014-16-D-5003.

*This document contains the best opinion of CNA at the time of issue. It does not necessarily represent the opinion of the sponsor.*

Approved by:



Dr. Jonathan Schroden,  
Research Program Director  
Countering Threats and Challenges Program  
Strategy, Policy, Plans, and Programs Division

October 2021

Request additional copies of this document through [inquiries@cna.org](mailto:inquiries@cna.org).

3003 Washington Boulevard  
Arlington, VA 22201  
703-824-2000  
[www.cna.org](http://www.cna.org)

Copyright © CNA 2021

*Zack Gold and Megan K. McBride*

Throughout its history of confronting sexual assault and racial extremism, the Department of Defense (DOD) has often described the perpetrators of such malignant behaviors as “a few bad apples.” But in the view of some experts, the “bad apples” analogy is flawed. For example, the Century Foundation’s Amanda Rogers noted that, whenever a white-supremacist incident occurs:

It’s treated as if it’s an isolated phenomenon; it’s never treated in comparative context with other military members in the movement...looking at strategy or ties.... Giving the appearance of “a few bad apples” helps further ideas of [white supremacists] being lone-wolf actors radicalized online, instead of coordinating via a strategy that’s effective precisely because it’s individual.<sup>1</sup>

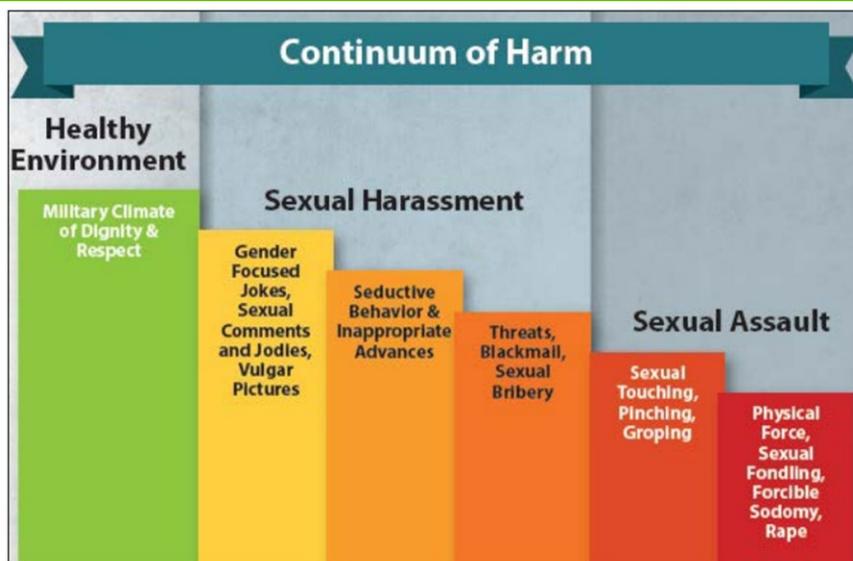
In recent years, DOD’s view of sexual harassment and assault has evolved to one in which it visualizes these activities as existing on a spectrum in which tolerance of less onerous behaviors leads to more egregious offenses, ultimately damaging military cohesion and readiness (Figure 1).

After conducting a comparative analysis of sexual harassment/assault and racial extremism, we find that the latter is also best visualized as occurring along a continuum of harm (Figure 2). For both issue areas, telling a sexist or racist joke is neither illegal nor violent; having sexist or racist bumper stickers on a vehicle is neither illegal nor violent; and sharing sexist or racist web content is neither illegal nor violent. And yet each of these examples exists on a spectrum that—at its most extreme—includes acts that are both illegal and violent.

Recognizing that racially extremist activities exist along a spectrum ranging from the legal but socially unacceptable to the illegal and violent is critical to informing a holistic approach to addressing this complex issue. However, this approach is also very actor centered in that it focuses on the individual engaged in racially extremist activities. A “continuum of harm” that ranges from respectful behaviors to racist jokes to racially motivated acts of violence enables the framing of the impact of racially extremist actions on the broader population instead of focusing on the individuals engaged in the activities.

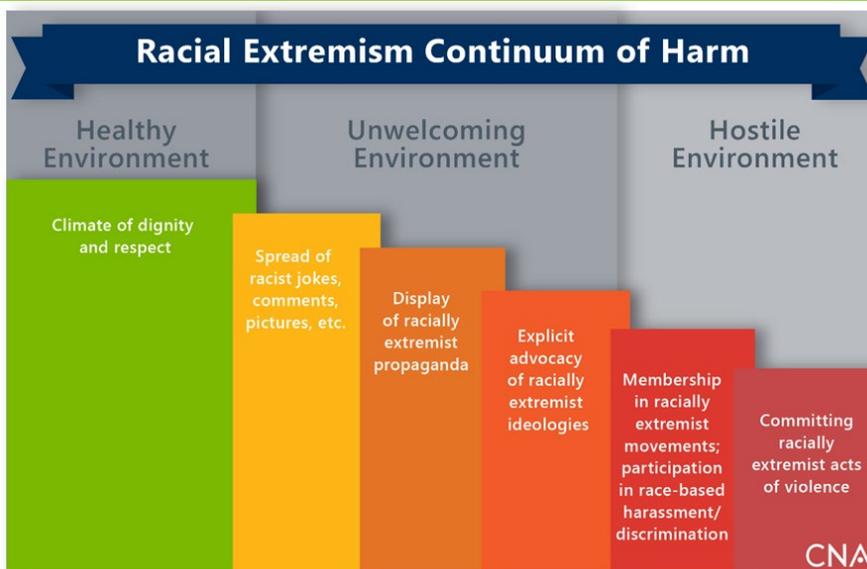
<sup>1</sup> Talia Lavin, “The U.S. Military Has a White Supremacy Problem,” *The New Republic*, May 17, 2021. See also Jeff Schogol, “The Pentagon’s Extremism Stand Won is not Enough,” *Task & Purpose*, Feb. 6, 2021.

Figure 1. DOD’s sexual harassment and sexual assault continuum of harm



Source: Colonel Litonya J. Wilson, "Advancing National Efforts to Prevent and Respond to Sexual Assault through Department of Defense Programs," DOD Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office, Apr. 8, 2015.  
 Note: This chart is not meant to communicate a progression from green to red, as it does not center the actor or perpetrator; instead, it is intended to capture the full, possible environment experienced by victims.

Figure 2. Racial extremism continuum of harm



Source: CNA.

The importance of these parallel visualizations notwithstanding, similarities between sexual harassment/assault and racial extremism are not limited to the concept of a continuum of harm. Additional parallels include, but are not limited to, the role of climate and culture in enabling these behaviors and the challenge posed by power differentials across the force.

## Climate and culture

As research on sexual harassment and sexual assault has shown, focusing on the few bad apples—the relatively small number of people who commit acts of sexual assault—obscures the reality that these acts often occur after a series of escalating behaviors (sexist jokes, unwanted touching, other forms of harassment) that establish a pattern of behavior. A 2018 report, for example, found a strong correlation between sexual harassment and sexual assault, leading the authors to suggest that the military “carefully monitor sexual harassment across the force.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, a 2020 Pentagon report found that female servicemembers who experienced sexual harassment were three times as likely to become victims of sexual assault as those who did not.<sup>3</sup> Though neither report included clear evidence of a causal relationship between sexual harassment and sexual assault, the authors of the first noted that the strong correlation made it possible that “interventions to reduce sexual harassment could address the same risk factors that contribute to sexual assault.”<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the broader range of activities depicted in the continuum of harm are problematic in themselves because they create an environment—known within military units as a “command climate”—inhospitable to women that has the potential to degrade morale within a unit and increase separation of unit members from the military.<sup>5</sup>

In a 2015 *Current Psychiatry Reports* article, Carl Andrew Castro and his co-authors list elements of military culture that make it difficult for the military to address sexual harassment and sexual assault.<sup>6</sup> Our research suggests that many of these elements also help explain the military’s struggle to create a climate inhospitable to racial extremism. These include the following:

- A premium on performance that can lead to a leader dismissing claims of assault or harassment of a “high performer”
- A culture that promotes conflict resolution at the lowest possible level, which discourages reporting problematic behavior to one’s superiors
- A culture that prioritizes resiliency as a matter of personal pride, which is a disincentive to asking for help
- The continuous movement of personnel, which renders it difficult to identify perpetrators (particularly repeat offenders)

---

<sup>2</sup> Andrew R. Morral et al., *Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment in the US Military: Volume 5. Estimates for Installation- and Command-Level Risk of Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment from the 2014 RAND Military Workplace Study* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2018), accessed May 27, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Caitlin M. Kenny, “Pentagon: Reports of sexual assault, harassment in the military have increased,” *Stripes*, Apr. 30, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Morral et al., *Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment in the US Military*.

<sup>5</sup> Patricia Kime, “Woman Nearly 30% More Likely to Leave the Military than Men, New Report Finds,” *Military.com*, May 19, 2020; Kari Hawkins, “Building safe command climate combats sexual assault in workplace,” *US Army*, Aug. 26, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Carl Andrew Castro et al., “Sexual Assault in the Military,” *Current Psychiatry Reports* 17, no. 54 (2015).

- A “team” mentality, in which reporting a problem demonstrates that one is not being a team player
- A complex reporting system with barriers and uncertainty
- The difficulty in securing convictions, and the inconsistencies or ambiguities related to assault investigations

Not all of these factors can be modified, but it is possible to effect a cultural change that shifts the military’s awareness of the issue, awareness of its consequences, and understanding of what is and is not acceptable (e.g., creating an environment hostile to certain types of behavior, in which bystanders are responsible for stepping forward).

We find that the elements in this list are also relevant to the issue of racial extremism in the military. Over time, sexual harassment and sexual assault have come to be viewed as actions that are symptoms of a deeper problem within the military’s culture (i.e., sexism and misogyny). We find that racial extremism can be viewed in the same way (i.e., symptomatic of racism and white supremacy), and that taking that view can lead to more productive framing of the issue relative to possible solutions.

## Power differentials

Another similarity that we identified between these two issues is the role of power imbalances and their relation to culture within the military. Sexual harassment and sexual assault are linked to gender, and social perceptions of gender have led to power imbalances between men and women. Both because there are more men than women in the military, and because the military has a hyper-masculine culture, these differences are exacerbated in the military services.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, racial extremism is linked to perceived hierarchies among races. There are more white servicemembers than nonwhite servicemembers in the military, and this is particularly evident in positions of senior leadership. In fact, data show that approximately 18 percent of enlisted personnel are Black (a percentage higher than that in the US population, where approximately 13 percent of citizens self-identify as “Black or African American alone”).<sup>8</sup> However, just 8 percent of officers are Black (a percentage lower than in the US population in general).<sup>9</sup> This is, in part, because Black officers are less likely than white officers to be promoted and retained at ranks above O-4.<sup>10</sup>

For both issues, the “dominant” actors in the problematic power paradigm are also in the numeric majority of both the military and military leadership (men with regard to sexual harassment and sexual assault, and white people with regard to racial extremism). In other words, both women and racial

---

<sup>7</sup> Jessica A. Turchik and Susan M. Wilson, “Sexual Assault in the US Military: A Review of the Literature and Recommendations for the Future,” *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 15 (2010): 267-277; Anne G. Sadler et al., “Factors Associated with Women’s Risk of Rape in the Military Environment,” *American Journal of Industrial Medicine* 43 (2003): 262-273.

<sup>8</sup> Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness (OUSD(P&R)), *Population Representation in the Military Services: Fiscal Year 2018. Appendix D: Historical Data Tables, Table B-37: Active Component Enlisted Members by Pay Grade, Service, and Race/Ethnicity, fiscal year 2018, and Table B-39: Active Component Commissioned Officer Corps by Paygrade, Service, and Race/Ethnicity, fiscal year 2018*, published in 2020; US Census Bureau (July 2019), “Quick facts-United States-Race and Hispanic Origin.”

<sup>9</sup> OUSD(P&R), *Population Representation in the Military Services*; US Census Bureau, “Quick facts.”

<sup>10</sup> US Department of Defense, Board on Diversity and Inclusion, 2020, *Recommendations to Improve Racial and Ethnic Diversity and Inclusion in the U.S. Military*.

minorities operate at a disadvantage within this culture, and when they are harmed, they are implicitly and indirectly coerced to laugh it off, to forgive, and to be a good sport rather than to challenge the existing norms and the institutional structures and hierarchies that propagate them.

## Recommendations and conclusion

Our analysis suggests that there are valid and compelling comparisons between the challenges of sexual harassment / assault and racial extremism that make it worthwhile to examine what DOD has learned from its experiences with the former in the context of the latter. We identified five core components that can be adapted from work done to prevent sexual harassment and sexual assault. These approaches are not perfect, but they represent an opportunity for DOD to start a few steps ahead from where it might otherwise begin in tackling the issue of racial extremism.

**Table 1. Sexual assault and prevention response (SAPR) components and corresponding recommendations**

Component	Recommendation
Evidence-based prevention framework	<i>Develop and apply an evidence-based prevention framework to understand and address racial extremism.</i>
Strategic plan	<i>Adopt the robust and multidimensional approach used for responding to the problem of sexual harassment and assault to the problem of racial extremism.</i>
Evidence-based training	<i>Develop evidence-based training requirements and learning objectives to guide development of training curriculum to prevent racial extremism.</i>
Reporting system and data collection	<i>Adopt a system for reporting racial extremism and documenting its full impact.</i>
Chain of command	<i>Consider removing reporting of racism and racial extremism from the chain of command.</i>

Source: CNA.

As DOD policies designed to end sexual harassment/assault continue to evolve, DOD should review them with an eye toward—when applicable—adapting them to tackle the similarly structured challenge of racial extremism. Most critical, though, at this pivotal moment, is the recognition that the problem of racial extremism is not one of “a few bad apples,” but is in fact a more pervasive challenge that—like sexual harassment and sexual assault—will require a more comprehensive set of solutions.