



Reports of Sexual Assault Involving Military Servicemembers Rose in 2009

More Than 3,000 Incidents Cited But Officials Optimistic That Cases Were Reported

By LUIS MARTINEZ

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Reports of [sexual assault involving military servicemembers](#) rose by 11 percent last year, but Pentagon officials said that was just what they were hoping would happen.

There were 3,230 reports of [sexual assault](#) filed in Fiscal Year 2009, the Pentagon announced today.

However, Pentagon officials see the [rising numbers](#) in a positive light because it has been a goal for the [Defense Department](#) to improve the reporting of cases of sexual assault, which often go underreported in both the [civilian and military worlds](#).

It is estimated that only between 18 percent and 20 percent of all sexual assaults are ever reported to authorities.

The Pentagon figures include both perpetrators and [victims](#) serving in the military and covers eight categories of sexual assault ranging from wrongful [sexual contact](#) to rape.

The Pentagon figures include sexual assaults involving a military member against a military member, a military member against a civilian or a civilian against a military member.

Pentagon officials say the rising number of reports indicates that their awareness programs are working and that servicemembers now know there are programs in place that can help victims of [sexual assault](#).

Dr. Kaye Whitley, the head of the D.O.D.'s Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office said the department wants to create a "climate of confidence," so victims will come forward to report an assault. She said this year's numbers reflect that goal.

"Increasing reporting has been one of our key goals," Whitley said. "We want people who are victims of sexual assault to come forward so they can get the help that they need."

The numbers have risen every year since the Pentagon began compiling the reports in 2005. This year's increase builds on last year's 8 percent increase.

There was also an increase in the number of reports filed in Iraq and Afghanistan. There were 175 reports of sexual assault in Iraq and 40 in Afghanistan in 2009, compared to 141 in Iraq and 22 in Afghanistan the previous year.

Victims have the choice of reporting a sexual assault either through "unrestricted reporting" or "restricted

reporting."

In the unrestricted category, a servicemember's chain of command is notified of the report and an investigation is begun. However, that process might intimidate some from stepping forward.

A second, confidential option, known as "restricted reporting," was created that waives getting involved in the military criminal justice process. However, it provides access to the same medical, mental health and other services available to those who file unrestricted reports.

Reporting Sexual Assault

Some of those who choose the restricted option later change their minds and choose to go with an unrestricted report. The numbers of conversions have also been on an upward trend. In 2009, 123 victims chose to convert their restricted reports to the unrestricted category, up from 110 in 2008.

"I believe that victims feel a real loss of control after they've been sexually assaulted," Whitley said. "When they report it and our ... coordinators give them these options they gain a little control back. And oftentimes they may initially file a restricted report and they may go away, and maybe a few days or weeks later they feel confident in the system. Then they change their report to unrestricted, and then we can pursue holding the offender accountable."

Whitley said her office is trying to improve its programs as it builds on more than 100 recommendations from recent audits conducted by the D.O.D. Inspector General and the Government Accountability Office. For example, the office is developing ways to expand the program to include civilians and contractors employed by the D.O.D., she said.

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