

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-105381](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Service members who experience unwanted sexual behavior—sexual harassment, sexual assault, and domestic sexual abuse—during military service may suffer from chronic mental health conditions. Service members who have such experiences are also more likely to separate from the military, exacerbating DOD’s critical recruitment and retention challenges.

GAO was asked to review service member mental health related to experiences with unwanted sexual behavior. This report examines, among other issues, the extent to which (1) DOD and VA screen for and provide access to behavioral health care services for such experiences, and (2) such experiences play a role in voluntary and involuntary separations of service members from the military. GAO reviewed guidance, analyzed DOD and VA behavioral health care data and DOD separation data, and interviewed DOD and VA officials at the headquarters level and at a nongeneralizable sample of military installations and VA medical facilities.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making 15 recommendations, 13 to DOD and two to VA, including that DOD develop guidance specifying how and when to screen for experiences with unwanted sexual behavior; consider how best to enable service members’ access to care related to such experiences at any VA facility, without a referral; and consider modifying its guidance to help ensure it fully considers potential factors contributing to service member separations. DOD and VA concurred with the recommendations.

View [GAO-23-105381](#). For more information, contact Brenda S. Farrell at (202) 512-3604 or farrellb@gao.gov.

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UNWANTED SEXUAL BEHAVIOR

Improved Guidance, Access to Care, and Training Needed to Better Address Victims’ Behavioral Health Needs

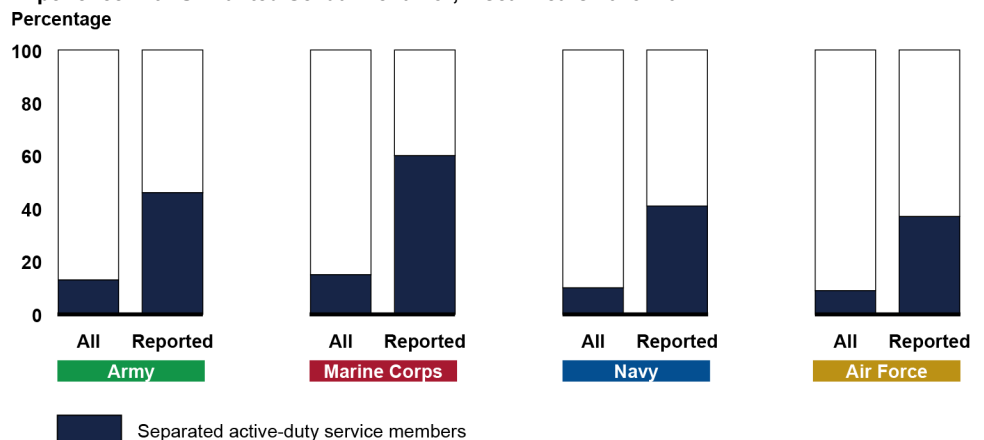
What GAO Found

The Department of Defense (DOD) and Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) offer behavioral health care to active-duty service members and veterans who experience unwanted sexual behavior. Unwanted sexual behavior includes sexual harassment, sexual assault, and domestic sexual abuse. However, several issues limit screening for and access to related care. For example:

- VA requires clients in VA medical facilities to be screened for military sexual trauma; DOD screens for behavioral health conditions but not specifically for experiences with unwanted sexual behavior. Without developing guidance specifying how and when DOD medical providers should screen for such experiences, DOD cannot ensure consistent patient support or care.
- Service members who have experienced unwanted sexual behavior may confidentially access non-medical counseling through VA. However, longer-term medical behavioral health care requires a referral from DOD, which may deter service members from seeking care. Until DOD considers how best to enable service members to access longer-term services through VA, without a referral, some service members may not seek needed care.

Analysis of separation data shows that service members who made unrestricted, formal, or some informal reports of experiences with unwanted sexual behavior left the military—voluntarily and involuntarily—at substantially higher rates than the overall active-duty population from fiscal years 2015 through 2021 (see fig.).

Separation Rates for All Active-Duty Service Members Compared to Those who Reported an Experience with Unwanted Sexual Behavior, Fiscal Years 2015–2021



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense data. | GAO-23-105381

However, multiple factors impede DOD’s ability to determine if an experience with unwanted sexual behavior played a role in separation decisions. For example, certain processes related to medical examinations and higher-level reviews of involuntary separations are available only for victims of sexual assault, for specific time periods, and for certain behavioral health diagnoses. Until DOD considers potential modifications to these processes service members may be unable to benefit from actions that may affect eligibility for VA benefits.