



# Harmful Masculinities and the Threat to Force Readiness in the U.S. Military

*By Kinsey Spears and Caroline Hayes*

## Executive Summary

The U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) and the Joint Force are not taking the threat of rigid masculine norms seriously enough. The Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda and the integration of women into combat roles have become important elements in the DoD's efforts to improve operational effectiveness and unit cohesion. However, the reticence to talk about masculinities and male trauma fails to account for how harmful gender norms shape military policy and culture – impacting the safety and wellbeing of all Service members.

As the threat of nuclear war in Ukraine increases and tensions with China continue to mount, the modern security landscape is exerting outsized pressure on the DoD to shore up its response to poor troop maintenance, including issues with recruitment and retention. Notably, metastasizing internal health crises that also harm men, including astronomical rates of suicide, drug and alcohol use, and sexual assault, threaten the stability of force readiness. An analysis of U.S. military culture that focuses on power dynamics and attitudes around manhood can help to make the connections between issues with force readiness and the gendered components of trauma, culture, and mental health.

Within the U.S. military, rigid masculine gender norms that exalt stoicism and devalue emotionality – due to fear of being perceived as weak – often inhibit men's ability to properly cope with trauma. The heightened pressure to appear unaffected by traumatic events and limited access to critical health services such as psychologists and counselors can result in a lack of help-seeking

behavior and an increased likelihood to perpetrate violence, particularly for men. Military constructions of gender have deleterious effects not only on the individual health and well-being of Service members and veterans but also on the military's ability to recruit and retain personnel.

Despite progress in recent years to address gender-related issues in the military, including the Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault in the Military investigations into sexual assault and harassment in the force and implementation of WPS mandates, such approaches too often are just a temporary solution. Investments into masculinities-informed gender analysis that unearths the root causes of violence serve to counteract the denial and neglect of men's mental health and psychosocial needs. Today's geopolitical realities and the cultural challenges of Department and Joint Force internal culture necessitate a comprehensive structural response within the DoD that broadens the conception of gender in security beyond "women's issues."

## Key Takeaways:

- Widely held gender norms that shape men's beliefs around what it means to be a man – including aggression, physical dominance, and heroism – are central to many interpretations of masculinity. While these norms and values can differ across time, culture, and context, certain assumptions of manhood are central features to militaries globally.
- The pressure to perform in high-stress environments, such as during special forces training, results in many Service members, often



men, turning to substance use as performance enhancers to meet physical demands or as a palliative for trauma or injury.

- Tens of thousands of active-duty personnel and veterans who have served in the military since 9/11 have died by suicide. Mental health, PTSD, and access to psychosocial support have an immediate effect on military recruitment. [Data released in 2021](#) suggested that almost [one-third of potential recruits](#) were worried about potential sexual assault if they joined the military, while stark rates of suicide continue to send shockwaves throughout service communities and beyond.
- There is a growing recognition among academia, international organizations, and civil society of the critical links between misogyny and radical extremism in the military – which are not being adequately addressed by the DoD.
- The Department of Defense briefly referenced the need to consider masculinities in the Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault in the Military. An upcoming Suicide Prevention and Response Independent Review Committee must have a rigorous gender analysis with a masculinities approach to effectively address suicide in military and veteran communities.

### Key Policy Recommendations:

- Carry out the recommended research as laid out in the Independent Review Commission Recommendations on Countering Sexual Assault in the Military.
- Conduct a thorough gender analysis on the upcoming Suicide Prevention and Response Independent Review Committee currently being carried out at the DoD.
- Conduct a gender analysis with a clear masculinities approach on all high-level policy documents related to national security and defense policy.
- Provide deeper and more sustained investment in mental health services and resources for Service members, including greater availability of counselors and psychologists.



American flags stand on the National Mall during the “We’ve Got Your Back: Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America’s Campaign to Combat Suicide” in Washington D.C. on March 27, 2014. 1,892 flags represented each veteran and servicemember who had died by suicide that year. (Ken Cedeno / Corbis via Getty Images)

- Include a masculinities approach in DoD efforts to affect positive internal cultural change in order to encourage men’s help-seeking behavior and shift norms around mental health stigma.





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(Win McNamee / Getty Images)



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The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and not an official policy or position of the New Lines Institute.

COVER PHOTO: Former U.S. Marine Sarah Plummer, a sexual assault survivor, speaks in support of the Military Justice Improvement Act on Nov. 19, 2013, in Washington, D.C. The legislation has not been passed. Its supporters say it will help address increasing numbers of sexual assaults in the U.S. military by establishing an independent military justice system.

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## Introduction

The United States Department of Defense (DoD) and the Joint Force are not taking the threat of harmful, rigid, and militarized masculinities – men and their interests, notions of manliness, and micro and macro cultures – seriously enough. While gender equality and the integration of women into leadership and combat roles are key elements in the DoD's efforts to improve force readiness, operational effectiveness, and unit cohesion, the reticence to talk about men and masculine norms fails to account for how gendered hierarchies shape military policy and culture. Consequently, the U.S. military faces numerous challenges ensuring the safe inclusion of individuals who exist outside heteronormative white male norms, such as women; queer, trans, and non-binary individuals; and people of color.

Additionally, metastasizing internal health crises – including astronomical rates of suicide, drug and alcohol use, and sexual assault – threaten the stability of force readiness and operational effectiveness. Conducting a critical gender analysis that serves to make conversations about gender and masculinity tangible in military and defense discourse and policy can contribute to fostering a culture where the safety and wellbeing of all Service members are

seen as an essential part of national security and military operations.

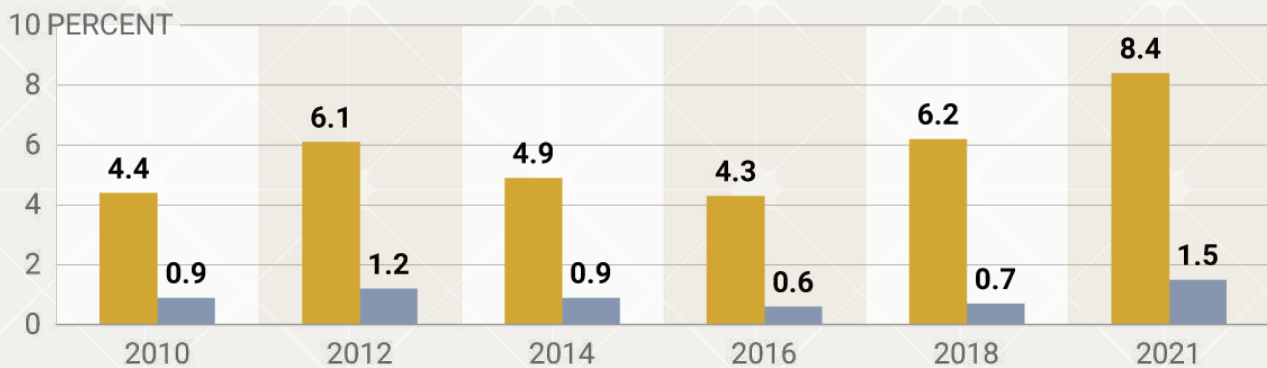
Gender equality and the integration of women into the military and combat roles have become key elements in the DoD's efforts to improve force readiness. The overarching global framework to these efforts is U.N. Security Council Resolution 1325, and the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, linking gender equality to the maintenance of international peace and security. While addressing this gap is necessary, limiting the examination of gender in security to exclusively women misses crucial ways in which gender ideologies shape military traditions, doctrines, and disciplines. Greater analysis is needed on the study of masculinities – men and their interests, notions of manliness, and micro and macro cultures – in order to develop a more complete picture of how institutional norms and decision-making processes within the U.S. military are gendered.

Many [academics](#) and [practitioners](#) have pointed out that the central focus on women in the WPS agenda ignores and distorts the role of men and masculinities in peace and security. By obfuscating the relationship that men and masculinities have in conflict, violence, and peace, such analysis fails to provide a comprehensive understanding on how gender, as an idea that is broader than just women, is

## Estimated Sexual Assaults of U.S. Military Personnel 2010 to 2021

As a percentage of women and men, respectively

■ Women ■ Men



Source: U.S. Department of Defense

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included in policies such as the WPS or other initiatives to support personnel and readiness. Further, efforts to acknowledge gender at all often fail to account for the linkages between rigid, hyper-masculine norms and their harmful impact on men themselves.

Widely held gender norms that shape men's beliefs around what it means to be a man – including aggression, physical dominance, and heroism – are central to many interpretations of masculinity. While these norms and values can differ across time, culture, and context, certain assumptions of manhood are central features to militaries globally. Often, militaries represent the institutional embodiment of the [protector and defender](#), distinguished by the workforce's physical strength and the ability for military personnel to appear emotionally restrained and resilient in the face of adversity. While an understandable operational principle on the surface, there is a difference between controlling response to challenges through effective emotional self-regulation and masking trauma due to the social stigma of perceived weakness. The fear of being perceived as weak by peers and up the chain of command [plays a role](#) in many Service members' unwillingness to seek care and treatment. This is [particularly prevalent among men](#), for whom asking for help is often seen as demonstrating vulnerability and is at odds with the "warrior hero" archetype that many military men are socialized to aspire to.

Across society, rigid masculine gender norms [inhibit](#) men's ability to properly cope with trauma. [In the military specifically](#), the heightened pressure to appear unaffected by traumatic events (as well as the glorification of the traumatic event itself) and the lack of access to critical health services such as psychologists and counselors, exacerbate the underutilization of evidence-based coping strategies to mitigate the harms of heightened exposure to trauma during service.

Trauma responses among men often include [extreme violence and hyper-aggression](#), impacting not only individual health and behavior but also interpersonal relationships: [extensive research](#) links men's personal experiences with trauma to [higher rates](#) of intimate partner violence and gender-based violence perpetration. At the same time, shining a spotlight on issues stemming from rigid masculinity and men's

(in)ability to cope with trauma does not take away from the importance of addressing the poignant inequalities women and gender diverse people face in the military. Rather, uncovering root causes of violence that are grounded in rigid masculine norms serves to counteract the denial and neglect of men's mental health and psychosocial needs – helping to prevent violence before it starts.

## The Impact of Harmful Gender Norms in the U.S. Military

Gender stereotypes and norms are woven into the traditions, doctrines, and disciplines that undergird Service cultures and inform each Service's approach to strategy, decision making, and management of the workforce. Most research investigating gender and the U.S. military has importantly exposed how these gendered hierarchies impact [women's meaningful participation](#) and/or [opportunities for advancement](#). Less is understood, however, about how the pressure to adhere to rigid masculine norms in the military can impact the health and wellbeing of all Service members, including men. A critical gender analysis can help connect the dots between rigid masculine norms that govern the socialization process of Service members and the internal cultural and organizational issues the U.S. military is facing. These issues, such as sexual assault, drug and alcohol use, and suicide, all have an impact on force readiness.

The high levels of sexual assault – that go both reported and unreported – in the U.S. military have continued to gain public attention. The [murder of Vanessa Guillén](#) in particular sparked efforts to address this issue in [Congress](#) and through [DoD policy](#). The [DoD's 2021 Report on Sexual Assault in the Military](#) found that roughly 35,875 Service members (about 19,255 women and 16,620 men) experienced sexual assault, [jumping 13% since last year](#). Some argue that this increase is because more [Service members feel comfortable and empowered to report through improved structural processes to address the issue](#), although this causal link remains challenging to verify. Nonetheless, the scale of the problem is immense, as sexual trauma has powerful and [long-term effects](#) on health and well-being that [directly impact](#) force readiness and effectiveness.



Rosa Samaniego holds a sign demanding justice for U.S. Army Specialist Vanessa Guillen during a public memorial at Chavez High School in Houston on Aug. 14, 2020. Guillen's murder and the subsequent suicide of chief suspect, Specialist Aaron Robinson put a spotlight on sexual harassment in the military. Guillen, who was serving at Fort Hood, Texas, went missing in April 2020, and her remains were found June 30, 2020, near Fort Hood. (Marie D. De Jesus / AFP via Getty Images)

Despite constructive efforts to improve accountability and recourse to justice for survivors in the military, gendered cultural norms that underpin this violence and disincentivize reporting persist. In the 2022 Independent Review Commission (IRC) on Sexual Assault in the Military report, one servicemember described how difficult it was, as a male survivor, to report the sexual assault and ask for help because he feared stigma from peers who would scrutinize his sexuality.

A stark effect of the military's hypermasculine culture is the oft-overlooked rates of male survivors of military sexual trauma and the long-term, unaddressed ramifications both on the individuals and the

Services writ large. In a [June 2022 survey of 4,069 veterans](#), researchers found that male veterans with military sexual trauma histories had nearly threefold increased odds of reporting future suicidal intent; two- to threefold greater odds of screening positive for current PTSD, depression, and generalized anxiety disorder; and nearly twofold increased odds of being disabled. The results of this study paint a concerning picture of the mental and physical health of men in the military and the dearth of support services available to adequately respond to and heal from this trauma. The prevailing cultural norm in the military to "[tough it out](#)" further inhibits both men and women from reporting abuse and seeking help in order to access critical and potentially life-saving services.





The recent [death](#) of a Navy SEAL candidate during [Basic Underwater Demolition SEAL \(BUD/S\)](#) training has added to mounting concerns of substance abuse in the military after the Navy discovered syringes and performance-enhancing drugs in his car. In 2020, an investigation into the [deaths of 44 soldiers at Fort Bragg](#) found evidence of rampant abuse of cocaine, MDMA, methamphetamine, and heroin, often used in tandem with alcohol. The pressure to perform in these high-stress environments results in many Service members, often men, turning to substance use as performance enhancers to meet physical demands or as a palliative for trauma or injury. Additionally, substance use can be a way for men to connect with one another: [Alcohol use facilitates masculine bonding](#) by developing a sense of community and trust, and it perpetuates certain American masculine traditions and transgresses social boundaries and hierarchies of class, race, and/or religion.

The magnitude of substance abuse issues within the special operations community, specifically, is under-researched and [largely obscured from public attention](#) due to the secretive nature of these units. Unfortunately, this lack of transparency makes it difficult for policymakers and health professionals to adequately understand and respond to the scale of the issue. As more [reports](#) of rampant illicit drug use by special operators have surfaced in recent years, some Service members claim this problem is nothing new, as self-medicating with drugs and alcohol is often used as a common mechanism to cope with unforgiving tasks and trauma, rather than seeking treatment.

Men's lack of help-seeking behavior is a larger issue in American society, and it is particularly pronounced with service in the military, where Service members and veterans experiencing serious trauma such as PTSD, sexual assault, and brain injuries are socialized into a [culture of stigma and shame](#) around getting help. Cultural norms that discourage Service members to seek treatment persist due to the [widely held beliefs](#) that their problems will spread throughout their units and chain of command, endanger their security clearance, and result in possible separation from the military. As restrictive emotionality is a key element to training for highly esteemed occupations, such as aviators, [men in the military largely perceive](#) the need

for emotional or mental health support as something that will sink their careers.

Further, men are [often worried](#) they will be perceived as cowardly or weak if they seek help. A [review of PTSD treatment engagement](#) among veterans found that military social scripts lead men to endorse the idea that experiencing a traumatic event is emasculating. The study also found that emotional stoicism and stigmatizing one's emotions in response to trauma is associated with PTSD severity and difficulties with functioning.

These gendered cultural norms have deadly consequences. In the United States, the rates of suicide for Service members and veterans are staggering: according to [July 2021 data](#) compiled by the Costs of War Project at Brown University, more than 30,000 active-duty personnel and veterans who have served in the military since 9/11 have died by suicide – compared to the more than 7,000 killed in post 9/11 military operations. The research found the rates of suicide for both veterans and active-duty personnel to outpace those of the general public. These rates, however, are likely an underestimation: In 2021, the VA [reported](#) that 5,000-7,000 veterans committed suicide every year between 2001 and 2019, which would bring the total number well above 30,000. While the military has historically attributed high suicide rates in the armed forces to combat trauma, this explanation fails to account for the underutilization of treatment and the stigma associated with treatment. Further, [mental health resources](#) are largely underfunded in the military, making access difficult for those who need it in situations of both emergency and prevention.

The military's socio-cultural environment that leads men to internalize certain masculine norms – including [emotional suppression strategies](#) and the feminization of failure – that disincentivize help-seeking behavior [undergirds](#) the data on the deterioration of military men's health. For men in the military facing serious mental health challenges, perpetuating traditional gender ideologies that equate masculinity with toughness and femininity with weakness and emotionality can harm the aggregate well-being of servicemen as a demographic group.





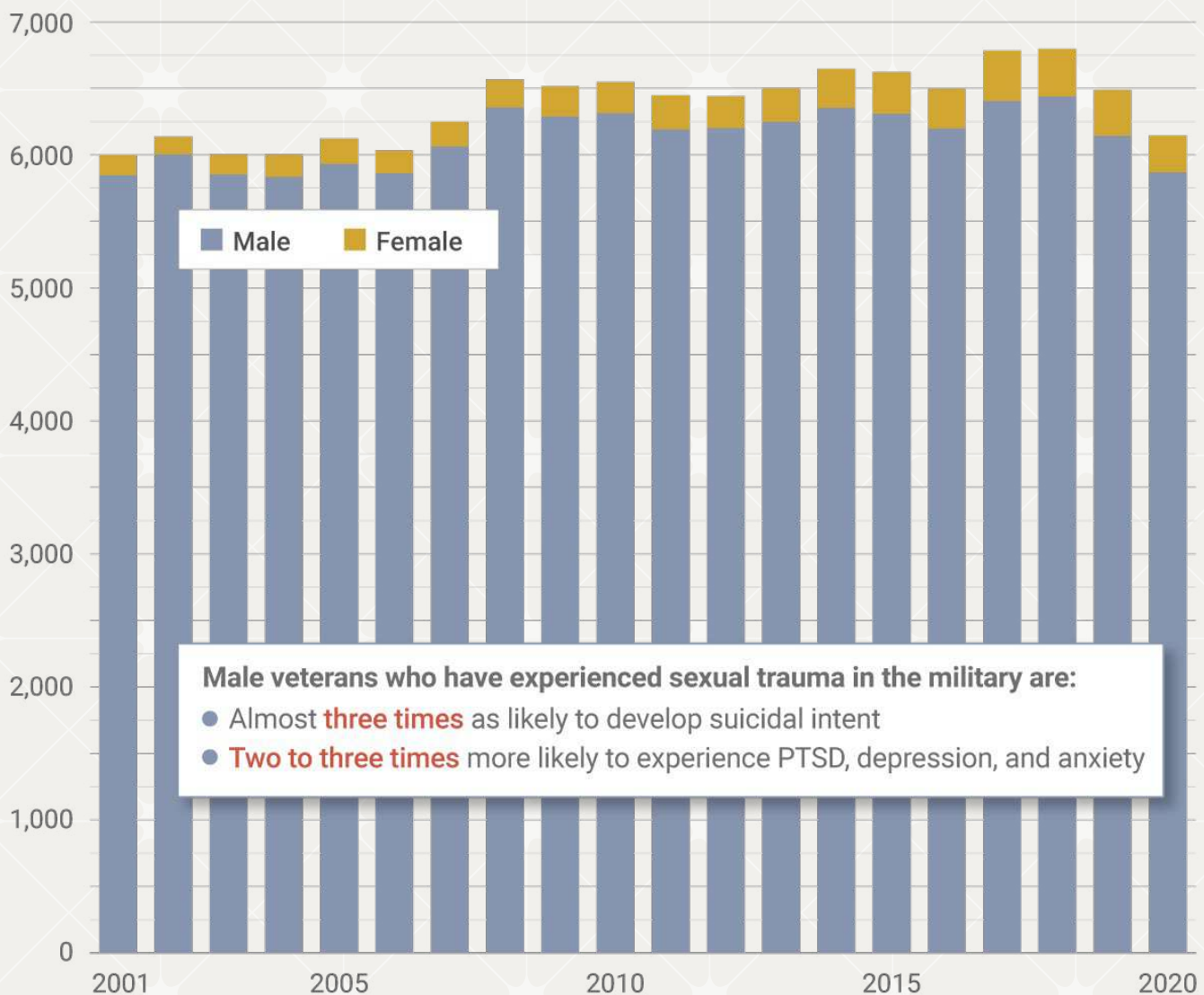
## A Threat to Force Readiness

Military constructions of gender have harmed the military to the point of failing its veterans and harming its ability to recruit and retain military personnel. The Pentagon has not minced words about the issues, saying they are facing the [worst environment for recruiting](#) since the end of the Vietnam War. The

reasons the military is struggling to recruit range across a variety of issues from COVID-19, to a competitive job market, to health problems among the recruitable population. Some of the public discourse around recruitment issues has touched on masculinity. [U.S. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene said](#), “They should be like, ‘Are you a toxic male? Please sign up,’” when addressing low recruitment numbers for the Army and

## Suicide Among U.S. Veterans from 2001 to 2020

Veteran suicide rates are already concerning as they outpace suicide rates of the general public. They even are higher for veterans who have experienced sexual assault as they struggle to find resources to manage their trauma.



Sources: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2022 report), Journal of Effective Disorders

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Navy. Considering [Gen Z's increasing reluctance to enlist](#) due to fear of harassment, assault, and suicide – issues linked to harmful gender norms in [the DoD's IRC report](#) – the irony of lauding “toxic masculinity” appears to be lost on Greene.

Some individuals blame a “[woke](#)” military for growing internal cultural challenges and [operational failures](#), or as Greene alluded to, “[toxic masculinity](#)” [not being accepted](#) or [gay and lesbian individuals](#) serving their country. While these explanations acknowledge the gendered dimension of recruitment struggles, the causal links are misplaced. High rates of suicide and sexual harassment and assault within the forces are all gendered dimensions of the health, safety, and security of military personnel and have a serious impact on military recruitment.

With suicide rates at an [all-time high](#), it is no wonder why [Army Secretary Christine Wormuth](#) suggested that suicide is a serious concern for Gen Z's interest in serving in the military. While the military is [attempting to accommodate Gen Z](#) by offering additional support to reach the required academic and fitness standards, the military may also need to consider the mental health crisis among active-duty personnel and veterans. Much of the discourse around recruitment in the last year has focused on COVID-19 and “wokeness,” but there is a lack of acknowledgement and understanding of the role that suicide and mental health are having on recruiting. The [struggle to recruit a younger cohort](#) at a rate necessary to maintain desired troop numbers has been traced to legitimate concerns about both the physical and psychosocial risks of military service.

In addition to mental health concerns, the physical and psychological risks for individuals in uniform also include high rates of sexual harassment and violence. [Data released in 2021](#) suggested that almost [one-third of potential recruits](#) were worried about potential sexual assault if they joined the military. The risks of service are stark for many young individuals who are considering joining military service. These issues, and subsequently the recruiting woes, will not be addressed without getting to the root cause of the issue. As outlined above, harmful masculinities play an outsized role in many of the physical and psychological risks associated with service outside of combat.

Without acknowledging this and determining ways to better understand and mitigate how harmful gender norms impact Service members, recruitment issues will remain unsolved.

On the other side of the coin are issues around attrition and retention. A [Rand Corporation study](#) found that adverse personal and professional experiences and PTSD are significantly associated with higher separation from the military. The study also found that psychological distress such as depression or PTSD more than double the odds of an individual separating from the military (after controlling for extensive demographic information). Overall, [high attrition](#) is also associated with sexual harassment and abuse and negative reactions to reporting said abuse – having a positive experience during reporting decreased an individual's likelihood of leaving the military. Access to mental health care, psychosocial support, and positive leadership are all directly correlated to high retention rates in the military. This is vital considering that attrition, particularly first-term attrition, [costs the military millions of dollars annually](#). The Heritage Foundation's index on military strength rated the Air Force as “[very weak](#),” in part due to retention issues. However, the news is not all bad around retention numbers: for instance, the Army has surpassed its [retention goals](#) every year since 2017.

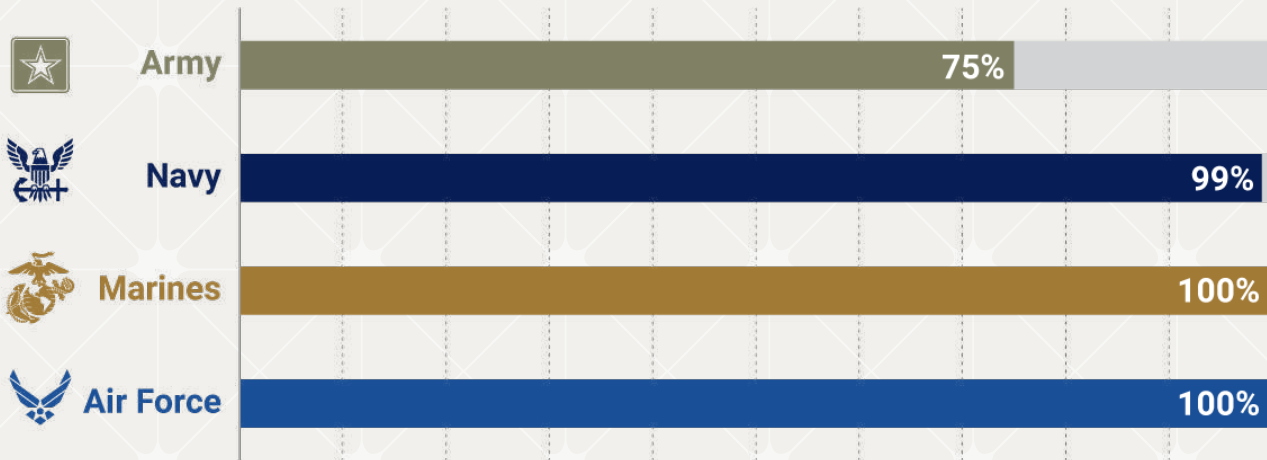
Concerns about harmful masculinities go beyond just retaining military personnel, as desertion rates have started to climb in recent years. In 2021, [157 sailors deserted the Navy](#), and the desertion rate has been increasing in the Navy every year for three years. Sailors and Marines, along with other military personnel, “[often don't have access to the help they need](#)” says Stephanie Kral, a former Judge Advocate General's Corps officer. Earlier this year, three sailors died by suicide in the same week on the same ship, the George Washington – an issue that is now [under investigation by the Navy](#). The mental health challenges facing the military and the ongoing trends of men not engaging in help-seeking behavior amount to a crisis for force readiness. With low recruitment, low retention rates, and high desertion rates, the military is struggling to employ a force that is capable of performing its missions around the world.





# U.S. Military Recruitment Goals Met in 2022\*

Percentage of recruitment goal for active-duty personnel



\*Fiscal year (Oct. 1, 2021 to Sept. 30, 2022)

Sources: Overt Defense, U.S. Navy, Marine Corps Times, Air Force Times

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## Hypermasculinity, the Military, and Domestic Terrorism

With the onset of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the heightened demand for military personnel led to the [loosening of recruitment standards](#) for the U.S. military, which enabled individuals aligned with neo-Nazis, white supremacist groups, and gangs to enter the ranks with greater ease. The lower standards also allowed for individuals with criminal records and those at higher risk for mental illness to become recruiting targets. As the military continues to struggle to meet its recruiting numbers, the reversal of these dangerous trends appears unlikely. In the wake of the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol, it was estimated that as many as [20%](#) of those arrested for participating in the attack on the Capitol were either current or former Service members. After the attack, U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin ordered a DoD-wide stand down to address extremism in the ranks. The DoD [released a report](#) by its Countering Extremism Working Group that included an update to existing DoD policy in governing extremist behavior by Service members, but subsequent DoD action has been [criticized for its "check-the-box" approach](#).

There is a significant gender dimension to the issue of extremism and the military. Right-wing extremist movements often try to [emulate military values and symbols](#), adopting masculine concepts of heroism and valor and [manipulating them](#) to be in line with extremist ideology. As the spread of gendered narratives that paint the military's attempts to diversify ranks and promote inclusion in policies as the ["feminization" or "emasculatation" of the U.S. armed forces](#) continue, right-wing extremist groups benefit. Men dissatisfied with their perception of today's "woke" military are instead [joining](#) white nationalist groups to realize or sustain their status within regressive racial and sexual hierarchies.

These groups often [reproduce a gendered hierarchy](#) in their own architecture of power by [relying on hypermasculinity as a central tenet](#), as many of the groups are male-dominated spaces attracting recruits to join their "brothers in arms." The hypermasculine culture that characterizes the military – valorizing the male heroic warrior ideal and devaluing the feminine – is echoed in organizational structures of right-wing extremist groups that "other" the enemy along racial and ethnic lines. By appealing to demographic groups largely made up of white men who feel maligned



from society due to perceived identity [status threat](#), [extremist groups capitalize on gendered insecurities](#) by promoting traditional masculinity and nurturing shared political grievances to foster a sense of personal belonging and value. The Proud Boys, for example, [attribute their plight to women](#) for defying what they believe to be the natural order of society, seeking to re-exert control in their lives through what is referred to by members as “radical traditionalism.” Members have described the group as a safe space for men to espouse their views without feeling persecuted, while fostering a sense of belonging through their shared misogynistic agenda.

[A recent study by the Center for Naval Analyses](#) describes the linkages between misogyny and radical extremism in the military culture as “best understood not as isolated illegal activities undertaken by ‘a few bad apples,’ but as existing on continuums of harm in which tolerance of less onerous behaviors leads to more egregious offenses, ultimately damaging military cohesion and readiness.” Despite the emergence of greater considerations for diversity and inclusion in leadership advancement, training, and recruiting policy, these efforts will only be successful to the extent that military cultures support such change. Deeper understanding and research on the impacts of gender on military identity and culture is needed for more effective policy design and implementation.

## How is the Military Addressing This?

There has been a concerted effort to address more issues around “gender” in broader national security and foreign policy plans and within the U.S. military in the last few years. Most notable are the creation of the [Gender Policy Council](#) and the subsequent [National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality](#), which focuses on “closing pernicious gender gaps and propell[ing] us toward a world with equal opportunity for all people.” However, despite talking about gender-based violence, intimate partner violence, and importantly, “matters of peace and security,” there is no discussion on the role that harmful masculinities play in any of these topics. This critical gap of harmful masculinities means there is not enough of an understanding of what affects individuals experiencing gender-based or intimate partner violence, retention, and recruitment

of women into security forces, and keeping active duty and veteran men safe. If the overarching gender policies laid out by the Biden administration largely ignore discussions of masculinities, then it is no surprise that legislation and plans that center women in Women, Peace, and Security will also be missing this critical analysis.

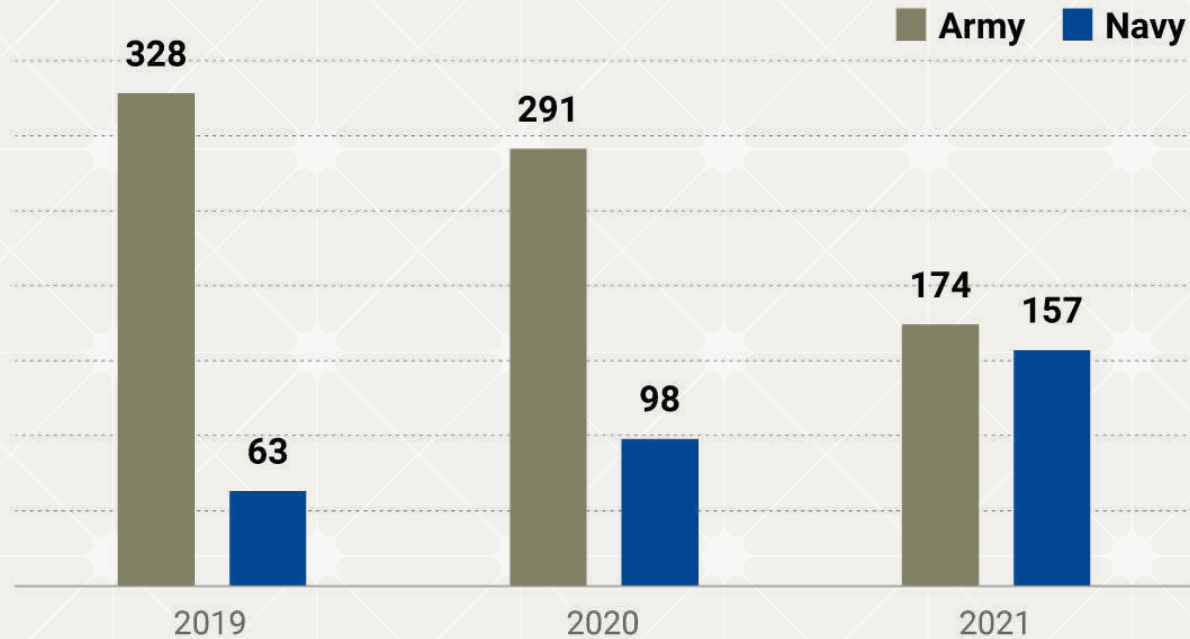
In 2017 the [Women, Peace, and Security Act](#) was passed and in 2019 the [United States Strategy on Women, Peace, and Security](#) was created, establishing the DoD, DoS, USAID, and DHS as the primary organizations to integrate WPS in policy and practice. Each organization was tasked with developing their own implementation plan; the DoD drafted the [Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan](#). The legislation, National Strategy, and the DoD Implementation Plan do not include any mention of masculinities nor how better understanding the impact of harmful and peaceful masculinities might be a necessary component to implementing the WPS agenda.

Beyond just policies and plans that specifically address gender, discourse around masculinities is also missing from broader conceptions of national security in the United States. In the September 2019 U.N. General Assembly, [U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres](#) stated, “There is a troubling commonality in terrorist attacks, extremist ideologies, and brutal crimes: The violent misogyny of the perpetrators.” Despite the international community’s growing acceptance of gender analysis’s salience in understanding pathways to collective security, [the National Security Strategy](#), released in October 2022, fails to acknowledge harmful gender norms or masculinities. There are sections in the strategy that, with an effective gender analysis, could incorporate masculinities: “Modernizing and Strengthening Our Military” includes a discussion on a resilient military but lacks a gender-informed problem diagnosis of current issues with climate and culture and would benefit from a greater alignment with the [international community’s findings on gender and resilience in security forces](#). Any of the commentary on autocracy and threats to democracy with a rigorous gender analysis would incorporate analysis on how [patriarchal authoritarianism and harmful masculinities](#), both domestically and abroad, pose a credible threat to American democratic norms.





## Desertions in the Army and Navy



Source: NPR

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Despite the lack of government-wide acknowledgement on how masculinities might affect foreign policy, national security, and ultimately force readiness, Secretary Austin has made a nominal effort to consider the impact of harmful gender norms on the Joint Force. Austin tasked two IRCs that tangentially address issues related to masculinity, as laid out earlier in this report.

The first IRC focused on [sexual assault in the military](#). In its report, there is some tacit and outright acknowledgement of the role that harmful masculinities play in the sexual assault rates. One of the explicit acknowledgements is in the recommendations, 2.6d, which states, “USD(P&R) [Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness] commission research on gender and masculinities to develop effective social marketing strategies to facilitate primary prevention efforts.” Further discussion on this recommendation acknowledges that new research is needed to address evidence gaps related to “healthy masculinities,” “hierarchies of masculinities as they relate to sexual violence,” and “the use of violence as a viable

solution to solve everyday problems.” The explicit nature of this language is a vital first step to laying the groundwork for the military to acknowledge how serious harmful masculinities are in sexual assault response and prevention. Critically, as the IRC report points out, [ineffective messaging can have an adverse effect on high-risk males](#) – in turn making them more violent and aggressive toward women in reaction to anti-violence messaging. Thus, ostensibly well-intentioned “check-the-box” attempts at policy change that do not contextualize gender-related violence alongside the social expectations of being male in the military can pose an even greater danger to servicewomen.

The second IRC report, the findings of which are to be presented to [Congress in February 2023](#), is on [Suicide Prevention and Response](#). This report will conduct a comprehensive review of the DoD’s efforts to address and prevent suicide. Details on the report’s content have not been released, but the comprehensive, thoughtful effort behind the IRC on Sexual Assault in the Military lays an important foundation for a deeper discussion of the connections between



suicide and gender, masculinities, and male trauma in the new report.

In addition to the IRC reports, there are a number of issues in the Special Operations community where harmful masculinities are starting to be addressed. The Navy has ordered an outside investigation of the elite course which tests Navy SEALs, BUD/S and the culminating event dubbed [Hell Week](#), after the [death of Kyle Mullen, rumors of instructors ignoring injury and illness](#), and [reports of drug usage](#). It is important that this investigation acknowledges how restrictive gender norms intersect with many of the issues that have sprung up in reports about BUD/S training, such as a focus on the [cult of physicality](#) and relying on illicit substances. [Five U.S. senators](#) also called on Austin to address the high rates of [overdose at Fort Bragg](#), which is home to the Special Forces and the Joint Special Operations Command, including the covert Delta Force. Overdose and complications from drug usage were the second leading cause of death for service personnel at Fort Bragg. It is clear from the deaths during Special Forces training, the high rates of drug use, and other issues affecting male service personnel that the military is not doing enough to understand the role that harmful masculinities play in the safety and security of US troops.

## Policy Recommendations

To attract Gen Z, the military is adapting its recruitment strategy through [ad campaigns](#) and trying to offer [competitive benefits](#). However, if there is not a concerted effort to bring about serious changes to ensure the safety and security of individuals in the military, no ad campaign will be enough. The competition for global power, as outlined by the new [National Security Strategy](#) and [National Defense Strategy](#), will depend on several elements of military dominance. A distinguishing feature of the U.S. military is its people: an all-volunteer force made up of individuals who are proud to serve their country. If the military does not make every effort to protect the safety, security, and mental well-being of its Service members, it will continue to lose its best and brightest to other industries – or worse, to hazardous substance use and suicide. A rigorous gender analysis addressing the harmful masculinities that undergird military

culture is critical to ensuring the health and well-being of both active-duty personnel and veterans.

Carry out the recommended research as laid out in the [Independent Review Commission Recommendations on Countering Sexual Assault in the Military](#). Following the recommendation in Section 2.6d is a good first step. The diversity of men's experiences within the military, the multiple forms masculinity can take in relation to race, class, and sexuality, and the ways these manifest across distinct organizational cultural contexts requires an increasingly narrowed and focused approach.

A gender analysis with a central focus on masculinities should be integrated into the upcoming [Suicide Prevention and Response Independent Review Committee](#) Report that is scheduled to be completed in early 2023. It is clear that rigid and harmful masculine norms that perpetuate anti-help seeking behavior are linked to the alarmingly high suicide rates of active-duty personnel and veterans of all genders. Furthermore, a recommendation that this Committee makes should mimic the IRC Report on Countering Sexual Assault in the Military and incorporate a call for additional research on gender and masculinities to develop better and more comprehensive plans regarding suicide prevention.

Conduct a gender analysis with a clear masculinities approach on all high-level policy documents related to national security and defense policy, such as the National Security Strategy, with a particular focus on drawing lines of collaboration between the Countering/Preventing Violent Extremism and WPS agendas, using a masculinities-informed lens to understand root causes of violence and break down silos in response.

Invest more deeply in mental health services and resources for Service members, including greater availability of counselors and psychologists. Although Austin has [called for](#) more focus on mental health, these efforts to date have largely been nominal: Last year, for instance, the Army [issued new guidelines](#) to its commanders on how to handle mental health issues in the ranks, including briefing slides and a script. But as suicide and mental health crises continue to spike, significant monetary resource allocation, going far





beyond PowerPoint presentations and pamphlets, is needed to have an impact.

Include a masculinities approach in DoD efforts to affect positive internal cultural change in order to encourage men's help-seeking behavior and shift norms around mental health stigma. Campaigns, such as the Navy's [Get Real, Get Better](#), should engage the diversity of sub-communities within the military with an intentional gender lens to unpack and change the

narratives about the relationship between trauma and masculinity/manhood – namely, reducing the stigma for men to seek help. Men face a wide range of difficulties that cannot be separated from their contextual and social expectations of being male. Success in creating institutional cultural change with the buy-in of men depends on the application of awareness-raising and support models that account for this. □



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