

Defense Advisory Committee for  
the Prevention of Sexual Misconduct

# Measurement of Selected Risk and Protective Factors Related to Harmful Behaviors in Military Environments

## Executive Summary

December 2024



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This report provides recommendations associated with a study undertaken by the Defense Advisory Committee for the Prevention of Sexual Misconduct (DAC-PSM) to assist the Department of Defense (DoD, or the “Department”) in its efforts to measure risk and protective factors related to harmful behaviors in military environments. The DAC-PSM was established in November 2020 by the Secretary of Defense, as mandated by the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020. The DAC-PSM (the “Committee”) provides DoD and Congress with independent advice and recommendations on the prevention of sexual assault involving members of the Armed Forces, as well as the sexual assault prevention policies, programs, and practices of each Military Department and Military Service Academy, including the Coast Guard Academy.

The Department’s Fiscal Year 2024 Integrated Prevention Research Agenda includes a priority to identify “risk and protective factors beyond the individual level contributing to harmful behaviors in military settings.” Research shows that lowering risk factors and increasing protective factors present at each level of the social ecological model (SEM) minimizes the opportunities for sexual violence to take place. Risk factors are characteristics that may increase the likelihood of negative outcomes (e.g., experiencing or perpetrating sexual violence), while protective factors are characteristics that reduce the likelihood of negative outcomes or that reduce a risk factor’s impact, though in both instances, there may or may not be a direct causal link.

In support of the Department’s research priorities, the Committee, through its Metrics and Performance Subcommittee, was directed to conduct a study with two objectives:

1. Identify and define community and organizational level risk and protective factors relevant to harmful behaviors in military settings.
2. Recommend metrics that could be used as measures of performance and measures of effectiveness.

The Subcommittee began its work by defining how the study fits within the broader context of Departmental efforts to reduce sexual assault and sexual harassment. In both civilian and military settings, efforts to prevent harmful behaviors have historically focused heavily on approaches targeting individuals and relationships, while approaches that focus on change within organizations, communities, and wider society have been less common. The dynamics of how these levels interact is captured in the SEM, a framework that public health scholars have utilized for more than 40 years.

This study focuses on two levels of the SEM: the community level and the organizational level. For purposes of this study, the Subcommittee used the following definitions:

- **Community level:** Includes Service members, DoD civilian employees, and dependents who may live and/or work together in the same geographical area, such as DoD installations, garrisons or ships, or surrounding neighborhoods and towns where military personnel reside
- **Organizational level:** Aspects of DoD/Military Department-level policies, practices, culture, and physical or social environment

The Subcommittee conducted its work in two phases: 1) Identification of risk and protective factors in military environments that are specifically present at the community and organizational levels, and 2) Identification of metrics to assess those factors.

During its Phase 1 efforts, the Subcommittee drew on member expertise, existing publications, and information provided by the Department's Office of People Analytics (OPA) to identify risk and protective factors that might be found at the community and organizational levels in military environments. The Subcommittee worked to identify factors that DoD is not currently measuring, or might be measuring at another level of the SEM. In addition, the Subcommittee sought to uncover new and innovative ways in which the Department could most effectively measure the risk and protective factors ultimately selected for examination.

In its Phase 2 work of identifying appropriate metrics for the identified factors, the Subcommittee sought information from OPA regarding existing metrics the Department might be using to measure these factors. A review of OPA's responses indicated that several of the identified factors are not currently being measured, while others are being measured although at a largely individual level. Ultimately, the Subcommittee recommended the continued use of several of the metrics being used in OPA's current survey efforts; however, for most of the factors identified by the Subcommittee, the Members determined that newly proposed metrics should be recommended.

In order to identify new metrics for consideration, the Subcommittee drew on extant research, as well as its own research expertise. Members identified metrics for each factor, and in making these determinations, discussed the validity, utility in a military setting, ease of implementation, and overall resulting informational value of each metric.

In summary, the Subcommittee identified a total of 24 risk and protective factors and provided a recommendation for the measurement of each one:

- **Community level:** 13 total recommendations (8 risk factors and 5 protective factors)
- **Organizational level:** 11 total recommendations (5 risk factors and 6 protective factors)

Given that published research for some of the identified factors is still nascent, the Subcommittee also considered the level of supporting evidence available for each factor and its proposed metric when crafting recommendations. Some of the identified metrics enjoy far more evidentiary support than others, and therefore, these recommendations are likely to be more immediately actionable by the Department. At the same time, the Subcommittee did not want to deemphasize the importance of an identified factor or metric whose use might strengthen the Department's data collection efforts, simply because the factor has not yet been examined in a military environment or because there is no validated metric immediately available for use.

In order to account for this variance in available evidence, the Subcommittee sorted its proposed recommendations into one of three categories – Established, Emerging, and Exploratory.

- **Established recommendations:** Well-defined, validated metrics previously used in military populations; ready to use as-is
- **Emerging recommendations:** Existing metrics, perhaps validated in another environment or population (e.g., college or university) that may require DoD modification before using
- **Exploratory recommendations:** Factors are likely to be of importance in military environments, but the Subcommittee could not identify a suitable existing metric to recommend. DoD is strongly encouraged to identify or develop appropriate metrics for future measurement of these factors.

The full report and its supporting appendices include greater detail on the study's identified risk and protective factors and associated metrics, as well as the level of evidence underlying each one. In addition, the report offers four over-arching recommendations and one observation/study limitation that may serve to strengthen the Department's future measurement efforts.

On November 14, 2024, the DAC-PSM voted to accept the recommendations provided in this report.

DoD leadership has repeatedly recognized the importance of making data-informed decisions, with questions often arising about whether a program is achieving the desired outcomes. Through effective measurement efforts, the Department can better demonstrate the impact of its prevention activities and identify opportunities for improvement.

The Committee looks forward to the opportunity to discuss its study recommendations with the Department in greater detail in order to help foster continued progress in creating environments safe for Service members.