

COSTS OF WAR

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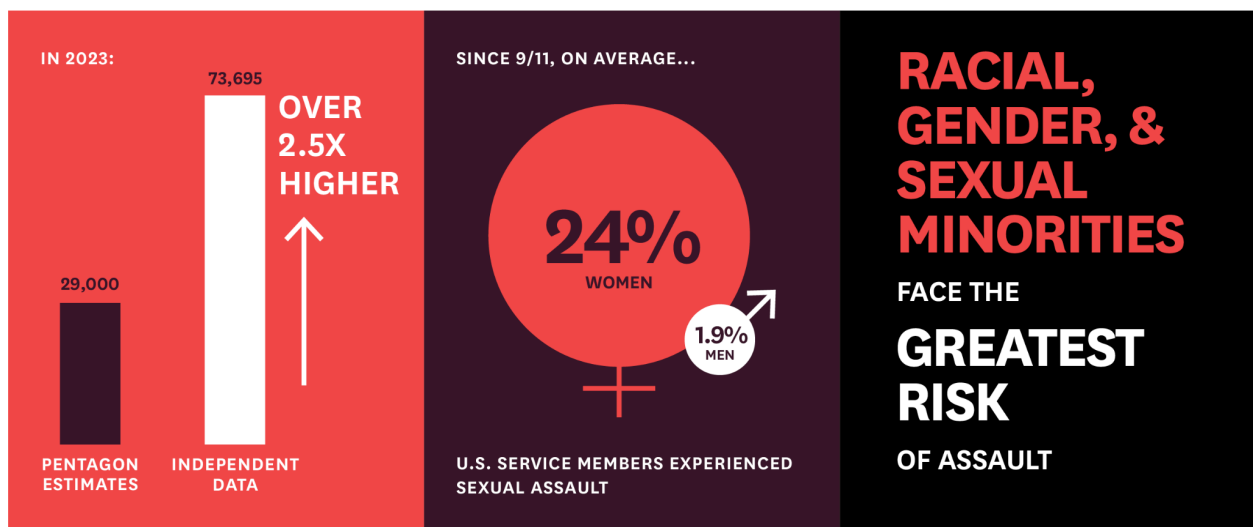
The U.S. Military's Sexual Assault Crisis as a Cost of War

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The Bottom Line:

Over the past decade, the U.S. military has implemented policies to promote gender equality, notably lifting the ban on women in combat roles in 2013 and opening all military jobs to women by 2016. Yet, even as U.S. military policy reforms during the “War on Terror” appear to reflect greater equality, violent patterns of abuse and misogyny continued within military workplaces.

Sexual Assault in the Military: Estimates



Key Takeaways:

- **The prevalence of sexual assault remained high during the “War on Terror,” per analysis of data from the Department of Defense (DoD) and independent sources.** Despite military policy changes, the sexual assault prevalence estimates by the DoD were at a high level of approximately 35,900 cases in 2021 – roughly the same amount as in 2001 when the U.S. invaded Afghanistan – and a slight decrease to 29,000 estimated cases in 2023.
- **A synthesis of independent data suggests that actual sexual assault prevalence is two to four times higher than DoD estimations in the 20+ years of the post-9/11 wars** – 75,569 cases in 2021 and 73,695 cases in 2023. On average, over the course of

the war in Afghanistan (2001-2021), 24 percent of active-duty women and 1.9 percent of active-duty men experienced sexual assault.

- **Efforts to address sexual assault over the past decade included numerous government and DoD initiatives**, including 10 DoD Inspector General engagements, 60 Government Accountability Office recommendations, over 200 government panel and task force recommendations, over 150 Congressional provisions, and more than 50 Secretary of Defense initiatives. This included **the passage of the “I am Vanessa Guillén Act” (Military Justice Improvement and Increasing Prevention Act) in 2023**, which removes commanders’ authority over sexual assault cases and hands it to independent prosecutors.
- **Despite efforts to address sexual assault, the prioritization of force “readiness” – the ability to train and deploy troops to Iraq and Afghanistan – above all else allowed the problem of sexual assault to fester**, papering over internal violence and gender inequalities within military institutions.
- **Racial minority and LGBTQ+ service members face greater risk of sexual assault.** Experiences of gender inequality are most pronounced for women of color, one of the fastest-growing populations within the military. Independent data also confirm queer and trans service members’ disproportionately greater risk for sexual assault.
- **Current efforts to address gender inequality in the military include legislation.** Jaclyn “Jax” Scott is one of hundreds of women named in the “Jax Act,” a bill awaiting a hearing before the House of Representatives that seeks to amend records of women who were denied rank, benefits, medical care, and disability because their combat was not documented as such in the post-9/11 wars.

The full report is available [here](#).

The [Costs of War](#) project, housed at Brown University’s Watson Institute, documents the costs of U.S. war and militarism. For more information, please contact costsofwar@brown.edu.