

NEWS : VIOLENCE

Report: U.S. Military Sexual Assault Victims Threatened With Violence, 'Friendly Fire'



by [Emily Crockett](#), Federal Policy Reporter, RH Reality Check
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The rampant problem of sexual assault in the U.S. military has drawn international attention this week, with one country charging that military commanders shouldn't be in charge of prosecuting sexual assault cases.

The United Nations [addressed](#) the issue for the first time in a report Monday, the same day that international advocacy group Human Rights Watch (HRW) released a [damning report](#) on the retaliation that sexual assault survivors say they face from commanders and military peers after they report their crime.

The UN's Universal Periodic Review Panel has looked at U.S. human rights issues like Guantanamo Bay and the death penalty before, [Mother Jones reports](#), but this is the first time that the panel has recommended the United States work to prevent and address sexual violence in the military, including by revamping the accountability structure.

The report from HRW outlined in harrowing detail one consequence of this violence—the relentless and sometimes brutal retaliation against survivors, who say they often find the aftermath of reporting worse than the attack itself.

HRW heard from service members who were socially ostracized, physically attacked, threatened with "friendly fire," or had their cars vandalized by peers who were angry that the victims got the assailant in trouble. They told HRW they were called "bitch," "whore," "faggot," or "cum dumpster."

"Within 6 months I had been physically attacked twice and verbally belittled by no less than six senior NCOs [Non-Commissioned Officers] as well as my entire platoon of peers," Roy Carter, an Army survivor, said in a written statement provided to HRW.

Carter didn't get a "real counselor," he said, until he had started drinking so heavily that he failed his physical fitness tests.

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Human Rights Watch released a report on the horrors of retaliation as the United Nations urged the United States to do more to prevent military sexual assault. (Shutterstock)



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 —Emily Crockett, U.S. Military Sexual Assault Victims Threatened With Violence, 'Friendly Fire'

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“By then a certain Sergeant in my platoon had told me he would kill me if we ever went to Afghanistan because ‘friendly fire is a tragic accident that happens,’” Carter said. “I started carrying a knife for protection from people in my own unit.”

Carter was one of 22 men out of 150 military sexual assault survivors interviewed by HRW. There are more male survivors of military sexual assault than female since the military is so disproportionately male, the report’s authors note, but men also report much less frequently than women do.

One female Marine’s peer allegedly threatened: “If you sleep with anyone in this unit, we will gang up on you and burn you.” Another Marine said she saw a post on Facebook with her picture and a caption saying she needed to be silenced “before she lied about another rape.” An Air Force survivor was reportedly told she had “better sleep light” and stayed in a hospital overnight because she felt nowhere else was safe.

Some said retaliation became a “daily part of life.” As explained in the report, victims were 12 times more likely to be retaliated against than to see their attackers brought to justice.

Retaliation from peers is common and virulent, the authors note, partly because military units are so close-knit. An allegation of sexual assault can divide loyalties and cause some to want to silence the victim to protect “unit cohesion.”

But retaliation is also very common from commanders, HRW found, who can single handedly ruin a rape victim’s career in the interest of protecting a fellow officer or an admired soldier.

“The shunning spanned the ranks,” one senior master sergeant told HRW. “Peers, supervisors, officers, and enlisted. If you made waves, rocked the boat, you were an issue and some[one who] threatened mission success and accomplishment.”

Many victims told HRW the fear of being labeled a “troublemaker” kept them from reporting, while others who did report say they found their previously successful careers in ruins. Supervisors would retaliate by demoting victims, giving them worse duties, refusing to promote them, or using any and every excuse to take disciplinary action.

Service members remembered receiving permanent black marks on their record for wearing the “wrong socks” or leaving dirty dishes in the sink. As the report details, an intelligence specialist could find herself forced to pick up garbage all day, or a computer expert could be stuck in a basement cleaning weapons for four months.

Victims said they were accused of “ruining the career” of an alleged rapist while their own careers were much more likely to suffer. The report found that victims were much more likely than perpetrators to be slapped with an administrative action that would damage their records, but perpetrators were much more likely to have those records corrected.

HRW noted that victims were also routinely punished for minor crimes like underage drinking or adultery, or “collateral misconduct,” that were discovered in the course of reporting their assault. The threat of those prosecutions became yet another reason service members feared coming forward.

“I don’t want to end up like you,” said one Marine to her roommate, who declined to report the violent gang rape that her roommate walked in on because of how badly the roommate had been treated after reporting her own assault. The roommate recounted this story to HRW.



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Servicemembers describe the military as a “family,” the report said, but that close relationship can become a trap—unlike normal jobs, servicemembers can’t escape their co-workers after-hours, and quitting is a crime.

Advocates have [long argued](#) that military commanders are too often biased against victims or retaliate against them, and that even supportive and fair commanders lack the necessary legal training to make an informed decision about prosecuting sexual assault cases.

On the UN human rights panel, Denmark urged that military commanders should no longer be in charge of prosecuting sexual assault cases. That marked the “first time that a human rights body has called upon the U.S. to remove key decision-making authority from the chain of command in cases alleging sexual violence,” Liz Brundige, director of Cornell Law School’s Avon Global Center for Women and Justice, said in a statement.

The Pentagon admits that retaliation is a problem, and its [own 2014 report](#) found that 62 percent of survivors who reported an assault experienced either professional or social retaliation.

HRW officials said that while some recent reforms are encouraging, the U.S. military is still completely unequipped to deal with retaliation.

The Inspector General (IG), the office charged with investigating complaints of professional retaliation, was described as “useless” by one lawyer for victims.

Despite the estimated thousands of cases of retaliation, HRW wasn’t able to find a single case in which an IG inspection under the Military Whistleblower Protection Act helped a victim. And the IG isn’t authorized to handle the pervasive social retaliation described in the report.

HRW suggested a number of changes to help curb retaliation, including strengthening the whistleblower act and prohibiting criminal charges for collateral misconduct like underage drinking.

“In such a chilling environment, it is no wonder that over three-quarters of victims never report an assault, leaving perpetrators in the ranks and free to reoffend,” Rep. Jackie Speier (D-CA) said in a statement in response to the report.

Speier, along with Sens. Barbara Boxer (D-CA), Ron Wyden (D-OR), and Ed Markey (D-MA), has introduced [legislation](#) to strengthen protection for military whistleblowers.

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To schedule an interview with [Emily Crockett](#) contact director of communications Rachel Perrone at rachel@rhrealitycheck.org.

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