

Contextual Insights from Service Academy Survey Comments

Office of People
Analytics



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Introduction

The U.S. Department of War (DoW) is firmly committed to eradicating sexual harassment (SH) and sexual assault (SA) in its ranks, including at the military service academies (MSA). Correspondingly, the DoW is also seeking to continually improve SH and SA programs and resources at the MSAs. The *Service Academy Experiences Survey (SAES)*¹ is one mechanism that the Department uses to assess the organizational climate at the MSAs and to expand and improve SA and SH prevention and response programs and resources.

Background and Methodology

Background

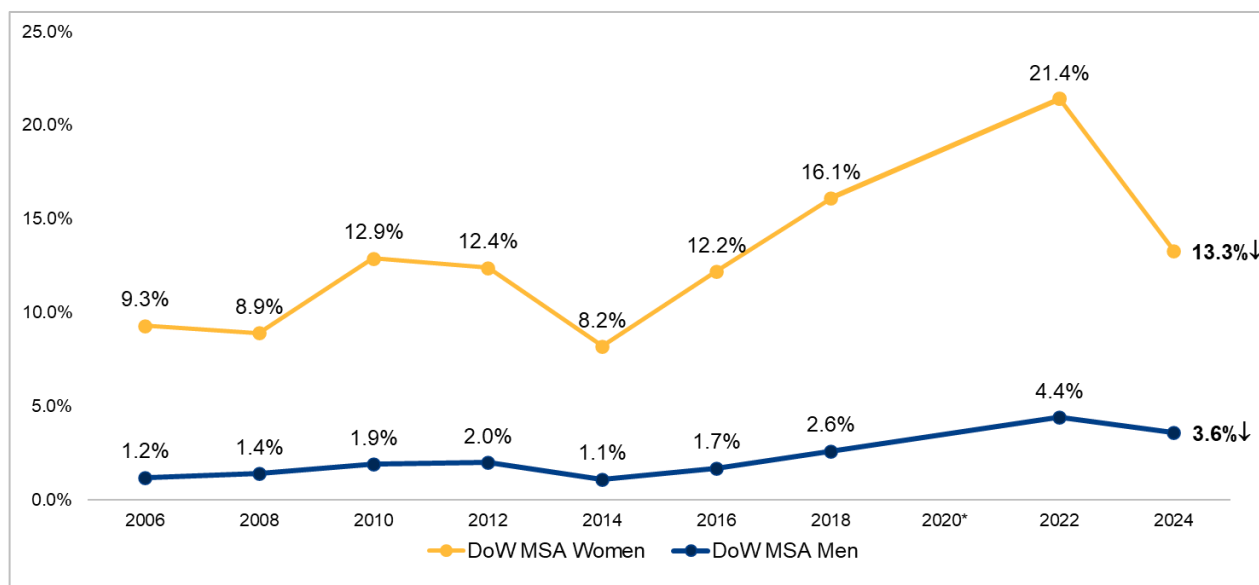
Since 2005, the Office of People Analytics (OPA) has conducted congressionally mandated assessments at the MSAs, known as the *SAES* project, to monitor the prevalence of harmful behaviors experienced by cadets and midshipmen. The *SAES* methodology alternates between qualitative research (i.e., focus groups, interviews, open-ended comment analysis) in odd calendar years and quantitative (i.e., survey) assessment in even calendar years. The survey monitors the past-year prevalence of unwanted sexual contact (USC),² SH, and sex discrimination among cadets and midshipmen, and assesses efforts to prevent these behaviors at the following MSAs: the U.S. Military Academy (USMA), the U.S. Naval Academy (USNA), and the U.S. Air Force Academy (USFA). Qualitative research aims to expand on findings from the surveys to better understand each academy's culture and climate around USC and SH. Combined, these assessments help academy leaders and DoW policymakers identify opportunities for improvement.

The rate of USC decreased between the 2022 and 2024 *SAES* iterations, dropping from 21.4% to 13.3% for DoW MSA women and from 4.4% to 3.5% for DoW MSA men (Figure 1). Although the rates of USC decreased between the 2022 and 2024 *SAES*, the quantitative data did not indicate why there was a decline in rates, suggesting the problematic behaviors remain prevalent. This qualitative effort aims to help explain the quantitative results by examining how contextual factors such as culture, leadership, and USC prevention efforts are affecting rates of USC across the academies. The aim of this study is to allow DoW and academy leaders to better understand the perspectives of cadets and midshipmen on these issues as well as gain crucial feedback on training, policies, programs, and actions related to USC and SH.

¹ Formerly known as the Service Academy Gender Relations (SAGR) survey.

² The term "unwanted sexual contact" (a proxy for "sexual assault") refers to a range of activities prohibited by the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ), including uninvited and unwelcome completed or attempted sexual intercourse, sodomy (oral or anal sex), penetration by an object, and the unwanted touching of genitalia and other sexually related areas of the body. The *SAES* measures USC using a comprehensive, behavioral list of items.

Figure 1.
Rates of Unwanted Sexual Contact by Sex at the MSAs



Margins of error range from 0.2% to 0.7%

Percentage of all DoW MSA cadets and midshipmen.

*Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 survey was unable to be administered.

Statistically Significant ↑ Increase from 2022 or ↓ Decrease from 2022.

OPA analyzed the open-ended comments from the 2022 and 2024 SAES and a selection of the MSA open-ended comments from the 2022 and 2024 Defense Organizational Climate Survey (DEOCS) to determine the extent to which the survey findings could be supported. Insights gleaned from this research could be used to inform policy changes to improve the experiences of cadets and midshipmen at the academies. These insights could also be used to inform prevention programs, trainings, and education to reduce the occurrence of these behaviors at the academies and improve reporting procedures associated with SA and SH.

Methodology

The 2025 SAES analysis included natural language processing (NLP) techniques, which were used to automate topic identification and grouped semantically similar comments together. NLP was chosen for its ability to programmatically analyze a large volume of survey comments and categorize them into key themes. OPA used NLP to identify meaningful groupings for the open-ended survey comments, and then researchers manually reviewed and validated the comments within these groupings to determine what further refinement or recategorization was warranted.

The NLP analyzed the open-ended comments written by cadets and midshipmen across the academies from the 2022 and 2024 SAES. These comments were analyzed to provide insight into how and why attitudes, opinions, and perspectives may have shifted between 2022 and 2024 due to transformational actions taken by the academies. Similar NLP methodology was used on MSA comment data from the

2022 and 2024 DEOCS³ to supplement data from the 2022 and 2024 SAES. Because not all respondents provided comments on the survey, the table below summarizes the total number of complete responses⁴ from each survey, overall and by academy, and the number of comments that were received, followed by the number of comments included in this analysis.

Table 1.
Survey Responses and Number of Comments

	Survey Responses	# of Comments Received	# of Comments Analyzed
2022 SAES	10,328	1,775	2,293
USMA	3,995	731	975
USNA	3,700	581	772
USAFA	2,633	463	546
2024 SAES	11,119	1,986	2,553
USMA	3,374	507	666
USNA	4,001	662	892
USAFA	3,744	817	995
2022 DEOCS	5,577	741	1,690
USMA	2,127	206	289
USNA	1,448	207	682
USAFA	2,107	328	719
2024 DEOCS	6,445	896	1,546
USMA	2,348	252	204
USNA	2,399	203	382
USAFA	1,788	441	960
TOTAL	33,469	5,398	8,082

Findings

Key themes derived from the open-ended survey comments yielded notable topics, including sexually harassing behaviors, prevention of USC, reporting processes, and academy leadership.

Results provided in this report are qualitative and represent perceptions from cadets and midshipmen. Where appropriate, quantitative data are provided to support and enhance these findings. Qualitative

³ The DEOCS survey contains five open-text items. The open-text field that was used in our analysis came immediately after questions on harmful behaviors, some of which are similar to questions on the SAGR survey. This allowed for the most parallel set of responses possible from the two surveys.

⁴ For the purposes of this effort, for the SAES comments, a model was run that allowed for the identification and removal of comments that contained unrelated or irrelevant comments (e.g., “I don’t know”). Therefore, Table 1 represents the number of comments received as well as the responses used for creating themes in the analysis. Due to a difference in processing, Table 1 presents the number of MSA DEOCS comments after unrelated or irrelevant comments were excluded from the count. Because some comments were lengthy and contain multiple “themes,” individual lengthy comments were split into multiple analytic “comments” to ensure each comment was only assigned to one theme.

results cannot be generalized to the full population of MSA students. Themes should be considered the attitudes and opinions of those who provided a comment only and not the opinions of all MSA students.

Sexually Harassing Behaviors

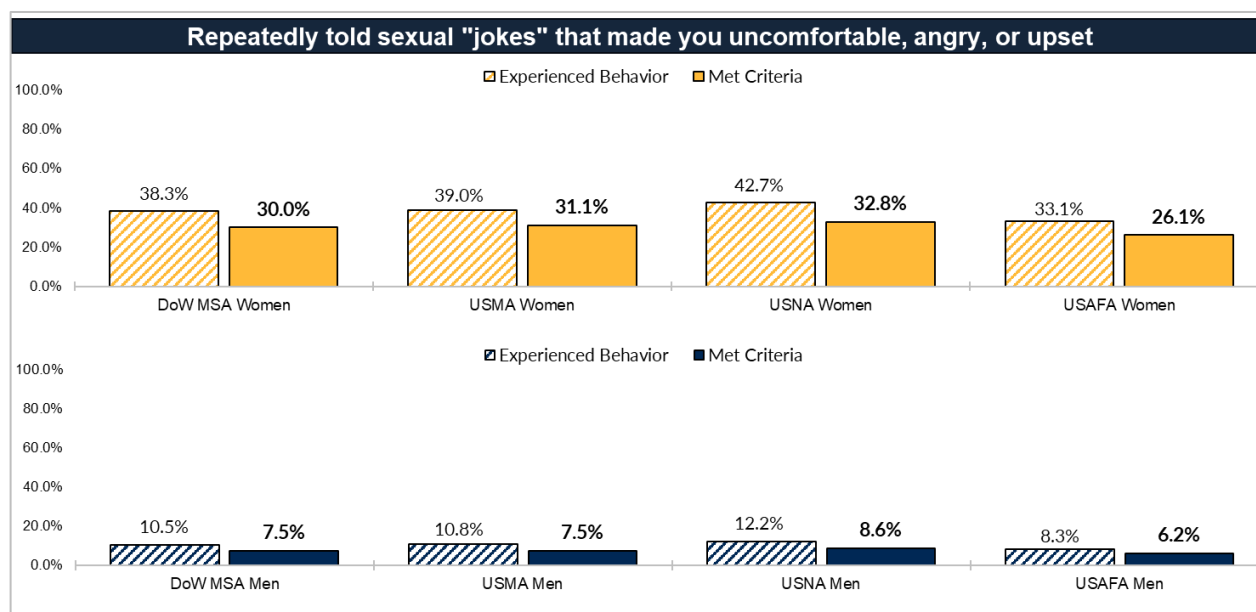
DoW policy defines “sexual harassment” as “a category of harassment that is sexual in nature, including, but not limited to, unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and repeated deliberate offensive comments or gestures of a sexual nature” (DoDI 1020.03). In their survey comments, some cadets and midshipmen described experiencing or witnessing a range of behaviors consistent with this definition—such as offensive jokes, degrading comments, and unwanted non-sexual touching. DoW policy recognizes that such unwanted behaviors undermine command climate, unit cohesion, and cadet and midshipmen dignity.

Although there was a general sense among respondents that rates of these unwanted behaviors are improving across academies, cadets and midshipmen perceived offensive jokes and sexually harassing behaviors as continuing issues.

“Most questionable behavior I’ve witnessed has resulted from distasteful jokes.” —USAFA, 2022

The 2024 SAES results showed that cadets and midshipmen frequently indicate they have been repeatedly told sexual jokes that made them uncomfortable, angry, or upset (Figure 2). However, comparisons of the 2022 SAES and 2024 SAES indicate there was a decline in the percentage of cadets and midshipmen identifying the behaviors they experienced as being pervasive or severe enough to meet the criteria for a complaint to be filed and investigated. Targeting these behaviors regardless of severity is important to prevent further unwanted harm from occurring as these behaviors disrupt and detract from the mission of the academies and are divisive to readiness.

Figure 2.
Experienced Sexual Jokes



Margins of error range from $\pm 0.3\%$ to $\pm 1.2\%$

Cadet and midshipmen comments reflected perceptions that leadership action around SH has somewhat improved. Some respondents noted, both in 2022 and 2024, that academy leadership talk about SH in a more serious manner, and that they are setting an example in their conversations and messaging to students that SH is an important topic. Some cadets and midshipmen who have not experienced SH indicated that they would have full confidence that their leadership would act accordingly if they did experience it. Other respondents, who have perceived SH, were certain that their leadership handled the SH instance well. Cadets and midshipmen indicated that student leadership has had an impact in creating a safer culture at their academies by demonstrating that addressing SH occurrences and learning about SH prevention is beneficial to everyone at the academies.

“[I] have not witnessed these behaviors and have full faith and confidence that guilty parties would swiftly be held accountable. The leadership has signaled how virtually important these topics are, and I fully agree.” —USNA, 2022

In the comments, some cadets and midshipmen suggested improvements to training to address tolerance among the student body for sexually harassing behaviors, including strengthening bystander intervention and providing context to cadets and midshipmen about how their comments could harm or offend someone else. Respondents reported that directly addressing the offending behavior in the moment created positive results when intervening in unwanted touching, but not with other SH behaviors.

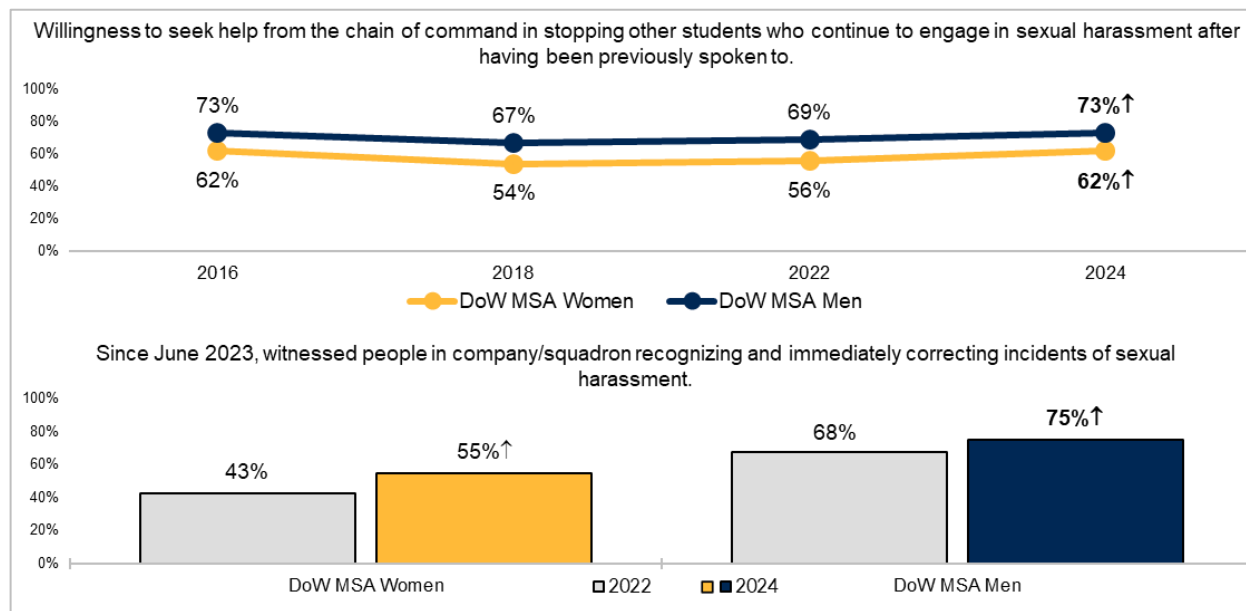
“I did see someone touch a female, but in class. She told me it made her uncomfortable, so I talked to the guy who did it and it turned out that it was an accident. He apologized anyways and all was resolved.” —USMA 2024

“Certain cases I witnessed were not entirely in a sexual nature, but there were times where a certain midshipman displayed a desire for no more contact and the other blatantly ignored it. More information about how to approach this would have helped a lot because while it was not fully sexual in nature, it was still problematic.” —USNA, 2022

“On occasion I have corrected people, and had my peers tell me to chill, let it go, brush it off, and disregard the language. Sometimes I have been outright laughed at, and the behavior continues. We have a serious culture problem and not enough people correcting it.” —USAFA, 2022

As shown in Figure 3, results from the 2024 SAES indicated an improvement in observing people in their company/squadron recognizing and immediately correcting incidents of SH; however, more could be done to help empower cadets and midshipmen to increase their willingness to point out when someone crossed the line with comments or jokes. The comments suggest that continued education and knowledge of what constitutes SH and how to appropriately intervene may lead to more cadets and midshipmen feeling empowered to step in and correct these unwanted incidents.

Figure 3.
Intervening When Witnessing Sexually Harassing Behaviors



Margins of error do not exceed ±1%

Analysis of comments provided insights into how victims of SH are treated at the academies and perceptions on holding alleged perpetrators accountable for their actions. Respondents reported instances of perceived retaliation (DoDI 6495.02, Volume 3) against victims of SH by both peers and leadership, which they noted could create additional distress for victims that would undermine their

efforts to recover from these negative experiences. Others shared the perception that alleged perpetrators were not held accountable for their actions, with comments noting that some alleged perpetrators were allowed to stay at the academy. Failing to hold alleged perpetrators accountable can enable them to commit multiple sexually harassing or retaliatory offenses, or lead to SA.

“People are afraid to speak up about sexist or inappropriate jokes because they think, not incorrectly, that they will be seen as a ‘helmet’ or not fun to be around, or ‘can’t take a joke.’ This culture needs to change, I’m just not sure how.” —USNA, 2024

Finally, some respondents commented that cadets and midshipmen mature over their time at the academies, which suggests that time spent at an academy can have a positive impact on their professionalism and perception of what is appropriate. This insight indicates underclassmen may benefit from trainings that focus on improving their awareness of how offensive comments, slurs, and jokes are harmful to others. Accelerating this process of learning and socialization may reduce incidence of these behaviors earlier in their academy careers. Similar sentiments were observed with MSA comment data in the 2022 DEOCS.

“I have noticed those comments significantly go down the longer we are in the academy. I hear (and heard) more comments in that nature from plebes and when I was one compared to being in my [YEAR]. So, I would say mids do mature and the trainings have to be doing something.” —USNA, 2024

Unwanted Sexual Contact Prevention Efforts

Across academies, there were positive changes to Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR) programs in 2024, with cadets and midshipmen noting the programs create an overall awareness of these unwanted behaviors and promoted taking USC topics seriously, leading to students feeling safer on campus. Between 2022 and 2024, comments around trainings and programs received mixed feedback. Student-led prevention groups were viewed positively and students felt more connected to these types of programs over other academy staff-led prevention efforts. Other promising trainings identified by respondents as being effective were fact- and scenario-based trainings, healthy relationship training, and prevention trainings that promoted general awareness of safety and surroundings.⁵

Respondent suggestions for improvement to current training and programs at the academy level included using small group formats to discuss USC, adding more training for those involved in USC prevention and response around confidentiality, making updates to SAPR trainings to cover USC topics in more depth, discussing what constitutes USC, and how to recognize crises before they happen. Comments by cadets and midshipmen indicated a desire to have more training on how to be a good bystander, healthy interpersonal conflict management skills, and healthy relationship and socialization skills. In addition, cadets and midshipmen also recommended providing an opportunity to practice the skills being learned in small group settings. These comments are consistent with OPA’s previous qualitative research at the MSAs, which found that these methods drove student buy-in, and allowed them to have a personal and authentic experience with the subject of SA (Davis et al., 2022).

⁵ Since these comment data were collected, many academies have begun offering “healthy relationship” trainings and have generally been responsive to the demand for more engaging training.

“I have, as a result of SHARP [Sexual Harassment/Assault Response Prevention] training, become much more perceptive and aware of my surroundings, though. I filter what I say and consider how my words may impact other people. I didn't do this before and in this way, I see the SHARP training at USMA as a success.” —USMA, 2024

“I really wish there was a way we could actively practice what we learn at SHAPE [Sexual Harassment and Assault Prevention Education] or SAPR/CMEO [Command Managed Equal Opportunity] briefs, either through engaging trainings where everyone is directly involved or through mock incidents where we put what we learn into action. The current system at USNA seems to kind of just check the boxes and only ensures we have been exposed to the trainings, and not that we agree or are able to put them into action. A midshipman is able to simply attend briefs and trainings all four years without ever involving themselves or demonstrating they have grasped and understand the messages the various programs are getting at.” —USNA, 2024

“Finally, a team called Valkyries at USAFA are the only ones doing research and actively pushing change at USAFA. I am grateful for them as they are actually trying to combat sexual violence; however, it frustrates me that a group of cadets is working harder than our upper leadership.” —USAFA, 2024

Reporting and Response

Respondents discussed perceptions of barriers that persist when reporting SA as well as throughout the investigation process. Although the policies, systems, and programs in place at the academies foster a culture that has felt supportive for some respondents, others mentioned that these systems must do more to ensure privacy for victims when they make reports. It is important to note that these surveys were administered prior to the implementation of the Office of Special Trial Counsel (OSTC), which shifted prosecutorial and referral decision-making for covered offenses outside the traditional chain of command.

There were numerous comments in the 2022 and 2024 SAES as well as the MSA 2022 and 2024 DEOCS comment data concerning the length or duration of the investigation process. Some respondents felt that the investigation process needs to take less time in order to protect victims and maintain trust that the system is working, whereas others said the investigation process needs to take sufficient time to gather necessary evidence to make an accurate determination of guilt. Although the MSAs have implemented physical separation policies, students also perceived that victims had to wait for the investigation to conclude before any action could be taken, leading to victims having to spend more time seeing the alleged perpetrator on campus.

“Overall, at the academy, too much secrecy behind investigations exists.” —USAFA, 2024

“I think we should separate perpetrators who are being convicted from the hall temporarily so the victims can live in peace before adjudications.” —USNA, 2022

“Two cases from my company last year are still ongoing and I find that unacceptable.” —USNA, 2024

Beyond the investigative process concerns, respondents perceived that victims who make reports of SA face stigma and could be retaliated against for reporting (i.e., ostracism; DoDI 6495.02, Volume 3). According to the comments, students are aware of instances where rumors spread about them, or victim blaming occurred. Similarly, respondents opined that there is a presumption of guilt within academy culture for alleged perpetrators, which can make the act of reporting seem daunting to the victim and serve as a barrier for victims to come forward as they do not want to be seen as “ending” someone’s career in the military.

“People who are accused are immediately presumed guilty, regardless of the evidence or the outcome of the trial.” —USAFA, 2024

“If accused of sexual assault, measures are taken whether innocent or guilty, and if innocent, reputation is harmed of the accused assailant regardless.” —USNA, 2024

“I did not want to ruin her career and the team’s future.” —USMA, 2022

The concept of false reporting was brought up in both the 2022 and 2024 SAES comments, as well as the MSA 2022 and 2024 DEOCS. Respondents expressed a desire to know what is done when a false report occurs, as well as what resources an individual has access to when they are falsely accused of SA/SH. Students expressed concern that false reports would negatively impact their military careers. This belief in the prevalence and potency of false reports can impact academy culture, cohesion, and derail the objective of the academies, which is to train and provide future officers and leaders with the tools needed for their service.

“There are very few resources available for those who are false[ly] accused of harassment and assault.” —USNA, 2024

Academy Leadership

Discussion around academy leadership centered around the specific actions that leadership has taken in recent years regarding SA/SH prevention and response, including the importance of leadership holding all students, leadership, and staff accountable for SA/SH. Across academies, comments identified that academy superintendents and commandants emphasize the importance of preventing and responding to SA/SH. For example, comments from midshipmen at USNA described their leadership as excelling in leading by example, with many respondents appreciating when their leaders shared high-level information via email and in public meetings on the status of SA/SH cases and their outcomes. This type of communication was seen as a positive effort toward improving awareness about the issue, transparency of the process, and trust in leadership. Comments reflected that leadership’s close involvement in the development of education and prevention programs was seen as crucial in communicating the gravity of SA/SH, and some respondents across academies suggested seeking input from cadets and midshipmen as a next step. Further, some cadets and midshipmen perceived leadership as taking SA/SH very seriously, which helped improve the academy environment by creating a safer culture by demonstrating that addressing SA/SH occurrences and learning about SA/SH prevention is beneficial to everyone at the academies.

“I think the current commandant has done an amazing job transforming how upper leadership addresses these issues. It's clear he doesn't just care because he has to. He personally cares about this issue. I think it makes all the difference in the world.” —USNA, 2024

These insights corroborate quantitative findings from the 2024 SAES, showing that perceptions of leaders at various levels have improved since 2022. As shown in Table 2, 83% of respondents indicated that academy senior leadership (e.g., superintendent, commandant) made honest and reasonable efforts to stop SA and SH within the last year, an increase from 71% in 2022. Further, 78% believed that commissioned officers in charge of their units and 67% believed cadet or midshipmen leaders were making honest and reasonable efforts to stop SA and SH within the last year, both of which increased compared to perceptions in 2022.

“I think in the three years I have been a cadet of USAFA, leadership has been more conscientious of sexual harassment and assault and that awareness has made its way to the cadet level as well.”
—USAFA, 2024

Table 2.
Efforts to Stop Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment

% of MSA cadets/midshipmen who indicated large/very large extent Trend Comparisons: ↑ Higher than 2022 ↓ Lower than 2022	MSA Total	
	2022 SAES	2024 SAES
Cadet/Midshipman leaders	57%	67%↑
Commissioned officers directly in charge of unit	70%	78%↑
Academy senior leadership	71%	83%↑

Margins of error do not exceed ±1%

However, analysis of comments revealed that some cadets and midshipmen, in both the 2022 and 2024 SAES and 2022 and 2024 MSA DEOCS comment data, perceive that academy leadership efforts to emphasize the importance of preventing and responding to SA/SH felt inauthentic (Note: Comments on the survey do not always indicate which level of leadership a cadet or midshipman may be describing. As a result, not all “leadership” comments may be directed at superintendents). Cadets and midshipmen noted this perceived inauthentic response by higher leadership has resulted in SA/SH prevention efforts being shifted to either immediate leadership (e.g., tactical officer [TAC], non-commissioned officer [NCO]) or cadets and midshipmen.

Comments indicated that leadership plays an important role in setting the tone of how SA/SH are addressed and comments mentioned that different levels of leadership have addressed these issues with varying levels of rigor. Others mentioned that leadership has not taken this topic seriously and described how the inconsistencies of certain leaders and officers vary, stating that they would like to see all direct leadership and officers be more consistent in how they respond to SA/SH. This is especially accurate as some comments expressed concerns regarding SA/SH behaviors being dismissed by some leaders while other leaders have been seen as supportive. The comments included recommendations for greater training of junior officers and TACs who lead cadets and midshipmen, which would improve consistency in these leaders responding to USC and SH reports in a trauma-informed way. Although the Department does not have specific evidence to support these perceptions, it is important to ensure the academies create an environment where victims feel safe coming forward to their chain of command, and that they receive the same level of support regardless of who in their chain of command they go to.

“My experience with Company TAC teams in handling SH cases has been very positive and I strongly trust my TAC's. However, more often than not, I have heard the opposite review from my peers about their TAC teams. While I haven't had negative experiences in that realm, that was a difficult distinction to make in the survey because I would not trust some TAC teams with [a] TAC issue.”
—USMA 2024

This sentiment was observed in both the 2022 and 2024 SAES and MSA 2022 and 2024 DEOCS comment data, with respondents having a desire to see leadership put in more effort and be consistent with their actions when dealing with occurrences of SA/SH. For example, respondents appreciated that other leaders (e.g., TAC, NCO) have stepped in to help survivors, creating a safeguard to ensure survivors have appropriate support regardless of who is in their chain of command.

Comments by cadets and midshipmen also indicated that it would increase trust in leadership commitment to reducing harmful behaviors if they perceived greater consistency in how USC and SH zero-tolerance policies are enforced. The perception that there is inconsistency in leadership response has been found in previous efforts to assess MSA culture regarding USC and SH, such as the DoW On-Site Evaluations in 2023 and prior SAES quantitative and qualitative research.

“I have been lucky enough to not have any truly negative outcomes from these interactions, but I do worry that if something bad were to happen, there may not be a chance I get the support I need, or more importantly, my attacker gets the punishment they deserve.” —USNA, 2022, DEOCS

“Leadership will say they take it seriously, but it often results in no follow-up, or insufficient responses.” —USAFA, 2024, DEOCS

“We have been making great strides in our process of prevention of sexual assaults, but leadership varies company to company and can be very toxic and/or punish, which discourages the reporting of sexual assault.” —USNA, 2024

Conclusion

Overall, comments from the 2022 and 2024 SAES and MSA 2022 and 2024 DEOCS indicate that positive changes made at the academies have appeared to help drive a drop in experiences of SH and USC at the academies. Respondents noted specific aspects that were working well in preventing USC, including student-led approaches, scenario and fact-based learning, training that promoted general awareness of safety and surroundings, and improvements to campus safety. They also noted positive leadership prevention efforts, including providing greater transparency on the status of SA/SH cases and their outcomes, supporting SAPR programs as crucial in cadets and midshipmen taking SA/SH seriously, and promoting student empowerment in preventing SA/SH. Areas of continued improvement revolved around decreasing tolerance of SH behaviors (e.g., jokes), enhancements to prevention and response programs, and updates to training (e.g., further bystander intervention training, what healthy relationships look like, recognizing SA/SH crises before they occur). Lastly, respondents wanted to see clearer communication with all parties during an investigation, more transparency into the reporting process and timeline, and greater leadership accountability and consistency in helping prevent USC and SH at the academies. Ongoing efforts to improve training, reporting processes, leadership actions, and support structures are essential for the long-term success of the SAPR program and the well-being of the entire academy population.

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