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# Powerful Perpetrators

The military and sexual  
misconduct: A summary  
of the literature

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Powerful Perpetrators is a five-year project (2023-2028) looking at sexual misconduct and abuse perpetrated by professionals, and the regulatory and administrative justice mechanisms used to investigate and sanction their behaviour. The project team are Dr Natasha Mulvihill (principal investigator); Dr Nathan Birdsall; Dr Emma Yapp and Dr Hannah K. Richards. More information is available at: [www.powerfulperpetrators.org](http://www.powerfulperpetrators.org)

Stage 1 of the project (May 2024 to October 2024) involved searching and synthesising the available literature on professional sexual misconduct. This work is collated in the following open access briefings:

- Yapp, E., Birdsall, N., Mulvihill, N., and Richards, H. 2024. *Doctors and sexual misconduct: A summary of the literature*. Bristol, UK: University of Bristol.
- Richards, H., Yapp, E., Mulvihill, N., and Birdsall, N. 2024. *The legal profession and sexual misconduct: A summary of the literature*. Bristol, UK: University of Bristol.
- Richards, H., Yapp, E., Mulvihill, N., and Birdsall, N. 2024. *The military and sexual misconduct: A summary of the literature*. Bristol, UK: University of Bristol.
- Birdsall, N., Mulvihill, N., Richards, H., and Yapp, E. 2024. *The police and sexual misconduct: A summary of the literature*. Bristol, UK: University of Bristol.
- Mulvihill, N., Richards, H., Yapp, E., and Birdsall, N. 2024. *Politicians and sexual misconduct: A summary of the literature*. Bristol, UK: University of Bristol.
- Mulvihill, N., Richards, H., Yapp, E., and Birdsall, N. 2024. *Religious leaders and sexual misconduct: A summary of the literature*. Bristol, UK: University of Bristol.
- Richards, H., Yapp, E., Birdsall, N., and Mulvihill, N., 2024. *Professionals (general) and sexual misconduct: A summary of the literature*. Bristol, UK: University of Bristol.

The briefings and our 'literature summary interactive tool' to compare our findings for each profession is available on our website: [www.powerfulperpetrators.org/publications](http://www.powerfulperpetrators.org/publications)



## What is the nature and extent of sexual misconduct and abuse by members of the military in the UK and internationally?

Military personnel are prohibited from speaking publicly about defence matters without authorisation (1). As a result, data detailing the nature and extent of sexual misconduct is difficult to access and is often contested (2,3). The available data from interviews with veterans (2,4), internal reviews (5), and Defence Select Committee inquiries (6) suggests that sexual misconduct is prevalent across the British military (3). In 2023 the Service Police initiated 272 investigations into sexual offence allegations (7). Self-report surveys show that experiences of ‘generalised sexual behaviours’ – sexualised jokes, language and gestures, and the distribution of sexually explicit materials – are common for servicewomen (8–10), and highlight that 13% of female service personnel (and less than 1% of male personnel) report being subject to sexual harassment in a Service environment (11). Studies of the US, Australian and Canadian Armed Forces similarly point to a pervasive culture of toxic masculinity and hypersexuality that fosters sexual misconduct (ranging from sexualised banter to rape) (12–24). In all contexts – including in the UK – there is significant underreporting of incidents of sexual misconduct (2,3,12,23,25).

## What administrative justice mechanisms do militaries currently have in place to respond to sexual misconduct and abuse by their personnel?

Allegations of **sexual harassment** go through an internal complaints procedure. The complaint is triaged by a ‘Service Secretariat Central Admissibility Team’ before referral to the ‘Outsourced Investigation Service’. Following investigation, a Decision Body (military personnel external to the complainant’s Chain of Command) will decide on an outcome and the action required. Outcomes can be appealed and thereafter referred to the Service Complaints Ombudsman (26). Allegations of **other forms of sexual misconduct** (those detailed in part 1 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003) are dealt with through the **Service Justice System (SJS)** (a parallel, but similar, system to the Criminal Justice System). The SJS manages both disciplinary and criminal offences. Minor disciplinary offences are dealt with through the Summary Hearing process. The Commanding Officer has a leading role in the Summary process. However, any allegation of sexual misconduct should be reported to either the Service or civilian police (6,27,28). In the SJS, the Service Prosecuting Authority will determine if a suspect is to be charged. If they are, then the case is taken to trial at Court Martial. A Court Martial consists of a civilian judge and a jury formed of military personnel (29). A defendant has a right to appeal the verdicts and sentence delivered by a Court Martial *and* a Summary Hearing. From 2010-2017, between 2% and 9% of all Court Martial trials related to sexual offences (30).

The USA, Australia, and Canada also have military systems of justice that are separate to civilian systems (30). In March 2024, the Canadian Government introduced new legislation to remove the military’s jurisdiction over the investigation and prosecution of sexual offences committed by military personnel on Canadian soil (31).



**How do (a) perpetrator characteristics; (b) victim characteristics; and (c) the context of sexual misconduct and abuse, compare across the military?**

Of the 272 investigations initiated by the Service Police into allegations of sexual offences in 2023, 88% of suspects were male and 83% of victims were female (7), a similar rate to that reported in 2018 (32). In 2023, 55% of suspects in the SJS for sexual offences were over the age of 26, whereas only 31% of victims were 26 or over (7). Sexual misconduct is most commonly perpetrated in training, educational, and professional settings, but also at social gatherings involving alcohol (2,6,33). In 2022 a blanket ban was placed on British military personnel paying for sex whilst overseas (34). The international literature indicates that younger women, disabled, LGBTQIA+, and indigenous personnel are more likely to be the victims of sexual misconduct (21,22,35–37). Male personnel also report experiences of sexual misconduct, particularly in relation to hazing or initiation ceremonies (19,38).

**How do social relations of power operate and intersect with context and opportunity at the (a) individual (b) organisational-professional and (c) socio-cultural level, to account for the perpetration of sexual misconduct and abuse in the military?**

Across Western militaries (including the UK), the hierarchical and male-dominated nature of the institution privileges masculinity and heteronormativity, in turn normalising hostile attitudes towards female and LGBTQIA+ personnel (2,15,17,19,21,39–41). In addition, the value that is placed on obedience to the chain of command, strong group cohesion, deindividualization, and protecting the institution prevents victims from reporting incidents of sexual misconduct (3). For example, evidence from the UK context has documented how perpetrators have been protected by their colleagues, ‘laddish’ culture and ‘banter’ has been defended as important for morale, motivation, and bonding, and victims have been threatened with punishment or ostracised for reporting incidents of sexual misconduct (2,6,33).

**How effectively do current administrative justice mechanisms (a) sanction past sexual misconduct and abuse and (b) seek to deter future sexual misconduct and abuse?**

In the UK, reports have suggested that some sexual offences are being downgraded to non-sexual alternatives so that they can be dealt with through the Summary process without involving the Service Police or Service Prosecuting Authority (6,42). Victims have reported feeling betrayed (2), unprotected (43), and mistreated (3) after reporting sexual misconduct. Concerns have also been raised about the Service Police’s ability to effectively investigate sexual offences and the low conviction rates at Court Martial (2,3,6), something that is echoed in other national contexts (15,22,25,37,44). Mirroring criticisms made of civilian criminal/adversarial processes, scholars have pointed to how military systems of justice fail to recognise and respond to harmful organisational cultures by focusing on the individual offender (3,17,44–46).



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