

KEYNOTE



Plain language summary

Military and Veteran Health Research Forum 2022: Plenary session

MAKING A DIFFERENCE: SEXUAL MISCONDUCT AND THE VALUE OF LIVED EXPERIENCE

OVERVIEW

Qualitative research can provide rich, rigorous, and meaningful results, offering important insights to help inform decision-making and program development. This is the message from defence scientist Dr. Stacey Silins in her address, "Making a difference: The value of lived experience research in understanding and responding to sexual misconduct in the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF)" to the Military and Veteran Health Research Forum in October 2022. This summary highlights the work of Dr. Silins and her team, the first qualitative study to receive the Sir Frederick Banting Award.

The goal of lived experience research is to examine the ways people perceive and experience events and the world around them. The research team conducted one-on-one interviews with people with lived experience of sexual misconduct in the military. Each had the opportunity to share their perspectives in their own words. Researchers identified commonalities across experiences. Their stories shed light on the human toll of the problem.

WHY IT MATTERS

It's important to understand the scope of sexual misconduct in the CAF and to improve supports offered to people impacted by it. The study aimed to identify barriers and best practices for people requiring support following a sexual misconduct incident. The study included:

- Women (mostly) and men of all ranks from across Canada
- 67 participants in 19 cities
- Wide range of ages and years served
- Close to three-quarters were regular force and almost two-thirds are still serving
- Participants who volunteered and wanted to make a difference

Researchers interviewed military members who described what it truly means for someone in uniform to be impacted by sexual misconduct, and how it influenced their careers and their views of CAF culture and military identity. Researchers learned how institutional responses can help, but also create harm.

The Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research (CIMVHR) works to engage academic and government researchers, facilitate new research, increase research capacity, and foster knowledge translation. CIMVHR hosts an annual Forum that brings together thought leaders to present new research, exchange ideas, share insights, learn, and collaborate with the shared objective of serving military and veteran health needs.

FINDINGS

Members reported challenges when they asked for support

Some common themes emerged in the interviews: People reported a lack of transparency and impartiality across institutional responses. Many highlighted the unfair burden they faced after experiencing a sexual misconduct incident, including a lack of accountability and consequences for the perpetrator. People lost trust in the system.

"Given my experience, I would never tell anyone to come forward. Ever." – Study participant

Negative experiences impacted people's experiences with the CAF

The research found that military sexual misconduct, like all forms of sexual violence, impacts lives in many ways. It also influenced participants' perceptions of the Canadian military.

"It changed my view of the Canadian Armed Forces. I'm being triggered by the fact that I see uniforms [...] I don't believe them anymore. I don't like them anymore. I don't like the culture." – Study participant

Secondary harm often adds additional trauma

When members ask for help after a sexual misconduct incident, the institution's response can create additional trauma. This is known as secondary harm. Some participants described enduring insensitive questions from CAF representatives who lacked proper training, and limited specialized mental health treatment.

"While I was there, [...] I just thought of my supervisor mocking me and like, 'Why am I doing this?' I don't even want to go back to the unit. I just wanted to die." – Study participant

Careers can be interrupted or damaged

Many participants reported they had no access to specialized mental health treatment or needed to wait to receive treatment. Some said they did not receive support from their chain of command, they felt betrayed or abandoned, and they felt unsafe in the work environment. All these issues impact a person. Many respondents reported damage to their careers, including:

- Unable to perform effectively at work
- Careers placed on hold
- Unable to get accommodations
- Feeling disconnected from peers
- Believing the military had changed
- Being released from the military

"I believed in it. I was so proud. And then it just got destroyed because this uniform, I was ashamed of it." – Study participant

KEYNOTE

Effective institutional responses are powerful

A small minority of people interviewed reported a positive overall experience. This demonstrates how powerful a supportive response can be.

"I really, really like being in the military. I'm really happy because of my current work situation. I am able to stay in the military and contribute effectively in spite of everything that's happened to me." – Study participant

KEY MESSAGES AND NEXT STEPS FOR LEADERS AND RESEARCHERS

- **Actions taken to address sexual misconduct will help prevent and repair harm.** This is very true of secondary harm. Meeting the needs of people affected by it helps to rebuild trust, improves perceptions of transparency and impartiality, and can restore perceptions of equity and fairness.
- **Research done well can help participants.** Research can be powerful, but it can also cause harm if it is not designed within a trauma-informed lens. By validating a person's experiences and reinforcing the significance of their knowledge, expertise, and perspective, research can support people who open up about their experiences.
- **A deeper understanding of the issues allows researchers to be better advocates.** They can improve policies and programs in the Canadian Armed Forces.
- **Future research into sexual misconduct should continue.** The experiences of specific subgroups should be explored, and longitudinal studies should aim to capture the chronology of events. For a wider lens on the problem of sexual misconduct, integrate cultural factors into research. Methodologically, qualitative research can be complemented with quantitative methods, and interventions should be evaluated as programs are being implemented.
- **Research needs to be meaningfully tied to action.** The data cannot be the end goal. To be good stewards of this knowledge, researchers need support in order to build capacity and expertise in participatory and restorative methods, which are designed to link findings with action.

This is a plain language summary of the keynote presentation, "Making a difference: The value of lived experience research in understanding and responding to sexual misconduct in the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF)," at the Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research (CIMVHR) Forum on October 17, 2022 in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Speaker: Dr. Stacey Silins, Defence Scientist, Director Research Personnel and Family Support, Director General Military Personnel Research and Analysis, Military Personnel Command, Department of National Defence, Government of Canada. Recipient of the 2021 Sir Frederick Banting Award.

See the video: [CIMVHR Forum 2022 Monday Afternoon Plenary](#)