

NEWS » COVER STORY

July 19, 2017

Sexual assault victims say Air Force Academy uses mental health counseling to get rid of them

The blame game

By Pam Zubeck [@PZubeck](#)



Courtesy USAFA

Since 2007, the Academy has logged more reports of sexual assault than the other two military academies combined.

After "Kristen" was sexually assaulted at the Air Force Academy, she followed the advice of Academy leaders and sought counseling. Only later did she learn her counselor had

slapped her with a mental diagnosis that was then used as grounds to try to drum her out of the Academy, a week before graduation.

"I took advantage of it, thinking it was in my interest," she says of the counseling, "but it was my downfall."

That practice is prevalent, say cadets: The Academy blames alleged victims for sexual assault and, as observer David Mullin, a former Academy economics professor, says, finds ways to label them "sluts or nuts" to minimize the school's sexual assault problem and rid the campus of those who step forward.

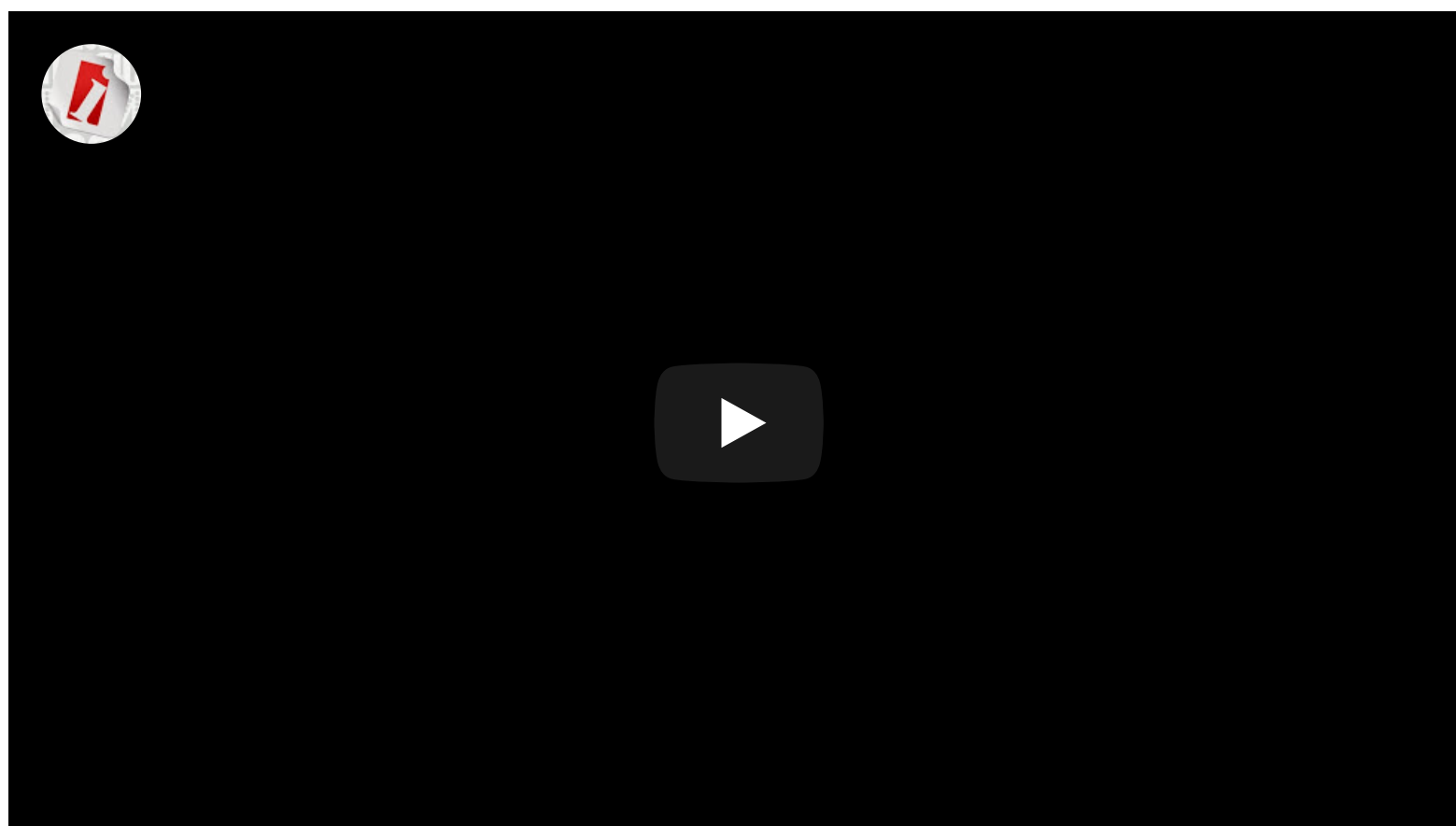
While the Academy has been disgraced over the years by exposés revealing academic cheating, cadet drug abuse and favoritism toward fundamental Christianity, its treatment of sexual assault has brought a plague of national headlines since an initial scandal erupted in 2003.

RELATED: **Air Force Academy has a distorted view of sexual assault says former employee:**
"This has got to stop"

RELATED: **Air Force Academy a has history of sexual violence**

Back then, dozens of cadets who said they were sexually assaulted claimed the Academy punished them for infractions related to the assaults while their attackers escaped prosecution, graduated and were commissioned as Air Force officers. The resulting uproar triggered at least three investigations, led to a superintendent's demotion and gave birth to a fresh commitment to help victims and prosecute criminals.

But new scandals have since come to light, including reports that the Academy uses cadets as confidential informants to ferret out drug abuse and rape in the Cadet Wing. Reportedly, the Academy looks the other way if accusations involve football players. (For more on the Academy's damning history of sexual assault, see "**A history of sexual violence.**")



Now, current and former cadets who say they were victims of sexual assault claim the Academy uses mental health counselors — the very people assigned to help them — to add diagnoses to their record in a way that could damage their prospects permanently. Once victims are labeled with a serious mental illness, they can be expelled and even forced to reimburse the Academy for their education.

Besides Kristen, who didn't want her real name used for fear of further damage to her

Air Force career, another cadet tells the *Indy* she was threatened with disenrollment after being diagnosed with a personality disorder. Another says he was bounced only to discover years later that the Academy had added multiple mental disorders to his record from a doctor he'd never seen, at a base he'd never been to, leading his attorney to accuse the Academy of "aggressive falsification of medical records." (All three submitted to extensive psychological testing outside the Academy, and were found to have no psychological disorders.)

How far-reaching such tactics are is unclear, but an Academy sexual assault response coordinator, speaking publicly about the inner workings of the Academy's methods for the first time, says it's common practice for alleged victims to be unfairly tagged with mental disorders and pushed out.

"I think deep down they don't think sexual assaults exist there," says Teresa Beasley, a career sexual assault response coordinator for the military who began working at the Academy in 2007. "They think that women are making it up. They believe that still. That's where we were in 2003. We haven't made any progress, because they don't want to admit that that can happen there."

Beasley has complained via official channels for more than three years about the Academy's treatment of sexual assault victims, and recently told the Defense Department that a new rule it imposed causes all three service academies to underreport assaults. On June 30, the Academy abruptly placed her and three others in her office on indefinite leave (see "**This has got to stop**").


The Academy has since been adamant that cadets understand the office is not closed, and that it's staffed with advocates "to ensure there is no interruption in victim care." In a statement, the Academy says it offers "a comprehensive safety net of helping agencies for victim care that includes medical care, counseling, chaplains, peer support, law enforcement and special victims' counsels."

But this isn't the first time the military has been accused of using mental health diagnoses as a tool to rid itself of sexual assault victims. Human Rights Watch, an independent, international organization that investigates human rights abuses, spoke with more than 150 sexual assault victims, including males, across the military branches. They found that victims who confided in mental health professionals later saw those private conversations used in efforts to discharge them. It also reported that mental diagnoses can impact military promotions and veterans benefits.

As psychologist and researcher Fred Malmstrom, an Academy grad, says, "It is not a favor to give [cadets] one of these disorders. You're stuck with this for life."

The Academy disputes all that, noting most cadets have expressed confidence in the Academy's senior leaders' handling of sexual assault and harassment as gauged by an anonymous survey. It also says all instances of retaliation reported through Academy protocols are investigated.

"They find ways to label them “sluts or nuts.”

click to tweet 

Kristen

But for Kristen, reporting a sexual assault to the Academy was hardly a positive experience. In fact, she says, when she sought counseling on the advice of her superiors, it almost ended her military service. "I found it beneficial at the time, and had no idea that it would later come back to hurt me."

She entered the Academy in 2005 with high ideals and a desire to serve, and excelled in academics and military education. From the start, she says, staff urged cadets to visit the Peak Performance Center, an on-campus counseling office run by the Academy, for help in navigating the Academy's demanding lifestyle. Cadets were assured of confidentiality and told they would benefit, she says, noting personnel "kept pushing" her to take medications, not explaining to her that could impact her ability to become a pilot. After repeated pressure, she relented and took the prescribed psychotropic drugs. When she stopped on her own, she was urged to resume. So she quit visiting the center, because things were going well for her, including a GPA worthy of the commandant's and dean's lists.

Then, during her junior year, she says she was sexually assaulted in her dorm room at night. Confused and traumatized, Kristen resumed counseling at the Peak center, though she didn't reveal the assault. Five months later, she decided to report the incident to the Academy's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office (SAPR) office as a restricted report, meaning her identity would remain confidential and no criminal investigation would be initiated.

"I did this because I've seen how victims of sexual assault are treated at the Academy," she says, noting victims are ostracized and looked down upon, and she wanted help to deal with that.

A year later, on the anniversary of the assault, she felt herself "struggling" and again sought out the Peak center counselor who'd since transferred to the base medical clinic. Kristen opened up and revealed the assault to the counselor. Though her air officer commanding (AOC), a staff member who helps guide cadets, and her Academy military trainer (AMT) didn't know about the assault, she later discovered the counselor had filled them in without telling her, which Kristen considers a violation of confidentiality.

Further, the counselor told the AOC that Kristen was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which triggers a medical board — a procedure in which the Academy determines a service member's fitness for duty.

She was not told this at the time, she says. In fact, when she asked, the counselor told her she would not be subject to a medical board. One day, her counselor told her how well she was doing, she says, but the next day — that week before her graduation — the counselor told her the Academy would not commission her due to an informal medical board's finding.

"I was seeing the counselor for what I thought was the last time before being commissioned," she says, "and I was under the impression it was more of a final wrap-up 'thanks for helping' type appointment. I was wrong. The counselor told me that I




Rosa Byun

would be med-boarded and that I would not be commissioned with my class."

Because she'd never told her parents about the sexual assault, the Academy's decision forced her to do so. She then found out a series of meetings about her had taken place without her knowledge. Pondering whether to appeal the informal board decision or request a formal medical board, she was asked at least twice by high-ranking Academy officers whether she planned to air her case in the media. She told them she did not.

“I did this because I’ve seen how victims of sexual assault are treated at the Academy.”

[click to tweet](#) 

Kristen says she feels Academy officials misled her about her options. Growing distrustful of them, she chose a formal medical board review, because the Academy would have to document its position. During that process, Kristen was surprised to learn that an Academy psychologist had labeled her with three disorders she'd not previously been told of, along with the PTSD. A letter submitted to the board contained detailed descriptions of her attendance at the Peak center and medications she was prescribed.

Academy officials portrayed her, she says, as "curled into a ball in my room unable to function" when in reality she was a stellar student with good military marks.

Then-Commandant of Cadets Brig. Gen. Samuel Cox wrote a letter to the medical board that Kristen found contradictory. In it, he wrote "Yes" in response to a question about whether she could perform all in-garrison military duties without restrictions; but he also noted that "she is not qualified to serve in any capacity in the Air Force." He also stated due to her "current medical condition" she couldn't maintain a security clearance, and noted that Kristen's AOC agreed that she wasn't medically qualified to serve.

But her AOC wrote a letter to the medical board gushing about her qualifications and describing her as a top-notch cadet who excelled on extra assignments that benefited the Cadet Wing and the community. Kristen "never failed to perform any of the requirements" of being a cadet, he wrote. In fact, he said, citing the Air Force motto, Kristen "exemplifies service before self. I have the utmost confidence that she will place the health and welfare of those in her charge before that of herself while accomplishing the tasks our country assigns."

The AOC also said that if she hadn't sought help in dealing with the "significant traumatic event" about which he knew no details, she "would not have been in the position she is in today. She would have gone through graduation and been commissioned because she was successfully dealing with her issues internally."

Kristen prevailed at the board review and was to be returned to duty upon approval of the Air Force secretary. But once that approval came through, the Academy delayed her commission for months with no explanation.

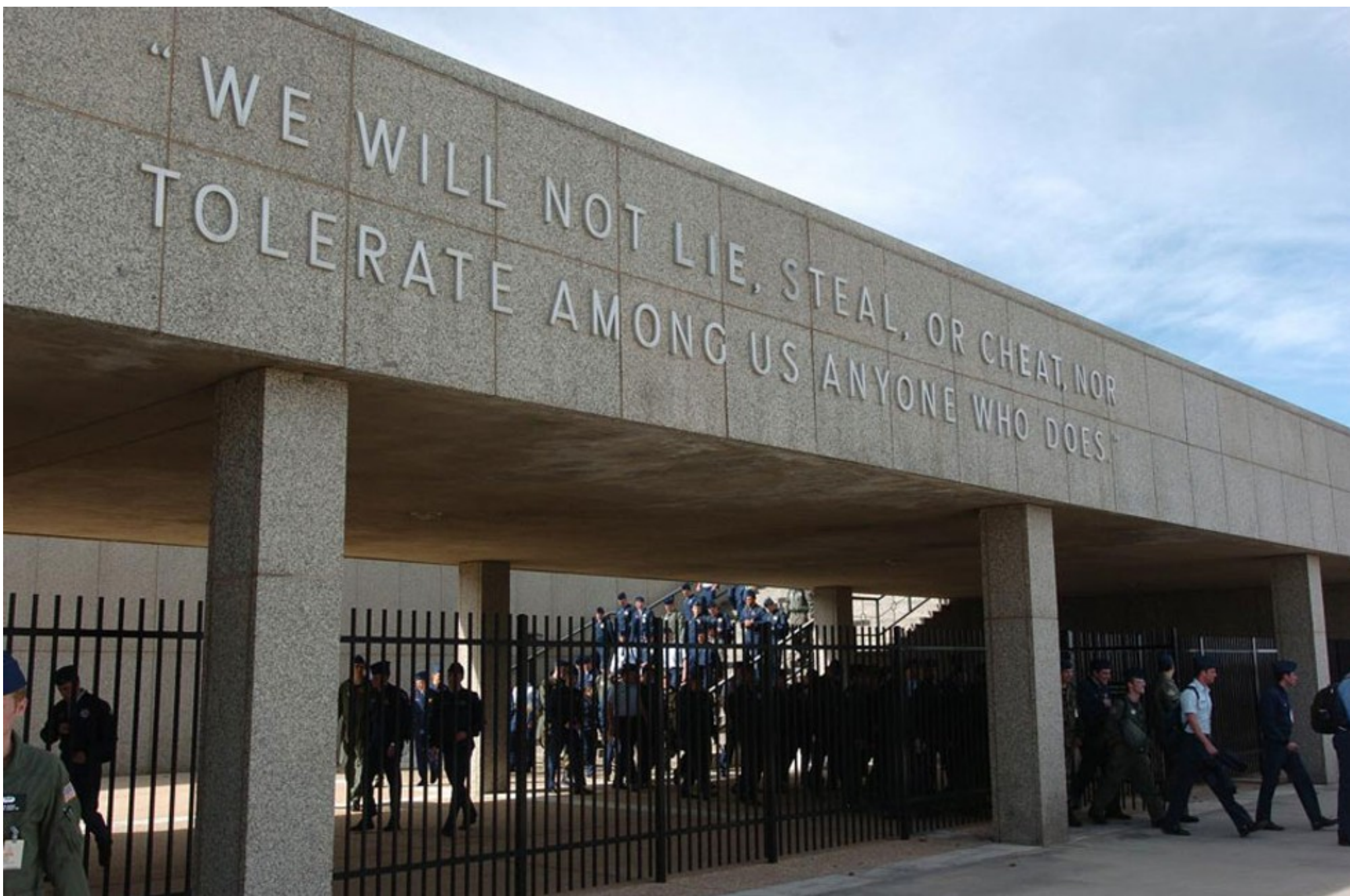
"I had to spend a lot of time trying to get to the bottom of things — to get orders to my base, to get paid, and to get out-processed from the Academy," she says, "during which I received no help from the Academy's commandant and superintendent's office. I had to seek assistance from faculty members who supported me from the beginning in

order to get answers."

Since then, she's served at several bases and has obtained a security clearance. But the Air Force has required her to submit to a mandatory mental evaluation annually, because of the Academy's mental diagnosis. Medical board officials, she says, advised her to see a therapist regularly during her first assignment, advice she later discovered worked against her "because it shows I can't operate without seeing someone." The Air Force removed the code from her record two years ago after annual visits revealed no issues.

Kristen hopes to serve a few more years before leaving the Air Force, though she originally planned a career in the armed forces. Now, she would advise other cadets who are sexually assaulted not to seek counseling. She believes the Academy, desperate to keep its sexual assault numbers low, used a mental diagnosis to try to discredit her for reporting the sexual assault.

"They're trying whatever they can," she says.



Courtesy USAFA

The Academy's honor code doesn't appear to be upheld by everyone at the AFA.

Adam

Adam DeRito was a mere three hours from graduation in 2010 when the Academy yanked him from the Cadet Wing while his family was present, he says. After a month in limbo, then-Superintendent Lt. Gen. Mike Gould told DeRito he was being disenrolled. "They tried to say I was a bad cadet," DeRito says.

It wasn't until years later that he accidentally discovered that the Academy, a year after he was disenrolled, had labeled him as mentally ill. He's since earned two degrees, served with the Colorado Army National Guard, and landed a lucrative job in the oil and gas industry.

The label, DeRito says, was an attempt to discredit him after he reported being sexually assaulted and after he found evidence of misbehavior and crimes by other cadets while acting as a confidential informant (CI) for the Academy's Office of Special Investigations (OSI) during his cadet years. DeRito, who was identified as a CI in a 2013 *Gazette* report that investigated the highly irregular practice, tells the *Indy* he was recruited by OSI several months before he was sexually assaulted at a party. DeRito doesn't remember much about the assault, because he believes he was "roofied," slipped a knockout drug in his alcoholic drink. He filed a restricted report of the incident with the SARP office, and sought counseling.

While fulfilling his CI assignment, Academy leadership accused him of fraternizing with a student at the Prep School, a training program to prepare otherwise unqualified candidates for the Academy; he denies the charge. However, the Academy served DeRito — who had been hit with previous disciplinary measures — with non-judicial punishment and then used the allegation to make a case for his disenrollment, he says. Having graduated the previous summer from Marine officer candidate school, he expected to be commissioned as a Marine upon his Academy graduation. Instead, he was suddenly a civilian.

Despite submitting 61 letters of support from faculty, active-duty and retired officers and cadets to Lt. Gen. Gould, DeRito was given a General Discharge Under Honorable Conditions, but with a stipulation code that prevented him from ever serving in the military, he says; he's appealed the code.

(DeRito notes the student he was accused of fraternizing with was later accused of having an affair, while she was a cadet and cadet candidate, with a married enlisted non-commissioned officer, who was convicted at court-martial; it's unclear whether the woman remains in the Air Force.)

After being forced out of the Academy, DeRito earned a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's degree in energy management from the University of Colorado Denver. He says he's had a successful career in the oil and gas industry and currently works as a field specialist and wireline supervisor for an oilfield services company.

Five years after his discharge, he joined the Colorado National Guard, 19th Special Forces Group, Salt Lake City, Utah, which he says found a work-around for the code he was given upon disenrollment. He finished Army basic training, airborne orientation and advanced training as a parachute rigger.



Craig Lemley

Adam DeRito had hoped to graduate with the Class of 2010 but was disenrolled just before graduation.

Then, in late 2016, DeRito learned of an opportunity to apply as a warrant officer candidate to become an AH-64 Apache pilot for the Utah Army National Guard. He filled out the necessary paperwork and obtained the required recommendation letters. But when he went to Fort Carson for his medical paperwork review, he was told the Academy had listed several psychological conditions on his record that would prevent him from flying for the rest of his life and bar him from any military service, he says. Oddly, the diagnoses were dated 2011, a year after the Academy discharged him.

Troy Todd, a psychologist who counseled DeRito during his Academy years but now operates a private practice, wrote an appraisal on April 11, 2017, at DeRito's request, "to provide an explanation of what I observed" in DeRito's records. Todd first met with DeRito four times after a "stressful event" occurred August 2009, he writes. Todd met with him again 19 times starting in February and ending in June 2010. During this time, Todd notes, DeRito was given a psychological evaluation by another provider, but there's no sign a diagnosis was given. DeRito again sought out Todd in May 2014 for what Todd characterizes as "supportive counseling or life coaching," not psychiatric treatment warranting a diagnosis.

Todd says DeRito's records show he was labeled with "diagnosis deferred" about the time of the evaluation in 2010, which isn't a mental diagnosis but rather means "there is no diagnosis" or "there is not enough evidence to suggest a diagnosis."

On June 20, 2011, the record shows a "records review" led to the mental diagnosis entries, which labeled him with "impulse control disorder" and "personality disorder NOS [not otherwise specified]," Todd's letter says.

Todd writes, "I wonder why there would be a records review after the student was no longer at the Academy, or in the Air Force. Further, I wonder why there is no records [sic] of my treatment of him, nor is there any documentation of the assessment that was done on him."


Regarding the diagnoses entered in 2011, Todd notes that impulse control disorder implies someone is unable to control urges or impulses and would act out in socially inappropriate ways. "I was treating Adam during some very difficult experiences he was having while at the Academy," Todd writes. "During these times, he was very much in control of himself. He was experiencing anger, confusion, betrayal and loss, but never did anything that would be considered socially inappropriate."

But he adds, "Of course, the date of the diagnosis does not refer to this time, it refers to the time he was not at the Academy, so I am not sure why it was there at all."

As for the personality disorder entry, he notes such a diagnosis "usually renders a person unable to function in all areas of life" and that normal protocols would require a documented evaluation prior to this label being imposed. "I am confused," Todd wrote, "as to why this diagnosis is not accompanied by a record of psychological testing. Further, the actual diagnosis was not placed in his record until after he was out of the military."

Both diagnoses are attributed as being entered by Kristin Henley Price at Evans Army Community Hospital at Fort Carson. DeRito says he's never met that person and has never seen a care provider at Carson. Carson spokesperson Daneta Johnson says via email that Henley Price "is not an Evans employee but an active duty Air Force doctor who at the time was stationed at the Academy clinic. We are not sure why it listed Evans as the clinic. Since she is not Army or an Evans employee, you will need to go to Air Force for your information."

“Adam DeRito’s medical records appear to be falsified.”

click to tweet 

Todd noted he worked with DeRito at times of his life when he experienced "very stressful situations" but added, "I have seen him overcome nearly impossible situations to become successful in his career, his formal education, as well as socially. A person with a personality disorder is incapable of doing these things."

DeRito submitted to an evaluation on April 11, 2017, by a civilian psychologist, Beckie Grgich of Colorado Springs, who administered the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory–RF, and the Millon Clinical Multiaxial Inventory–3rd edition. She reported the MMPI revealed "no significant concerns" related to a variety of issues. The MCMI showed "no severe personality pathology" and "no clinical syndromes."

Her nine–page assessment concludes by pointing out DeRito's degrees, successful career and achievement in the National Guard. "This type of behavior and functioning is not typical of individuals struggling with mental health concerns," she wrote, "or individuals who manifest deficits with thought–patterns, emotions or behavior."

DeRito has hired an attorney who has demanded that DeRito's Air Force diploma and commission be approved. Herbert Rubenstein of Brooklyn, New York, says DeRito also plans to seek unspecified monetary damages.

"Psychologists seem to be in collusion with the Academy, and may be falsifying records of people who the powers that be at the Academy want to taint," says Rubenstein, who's represented numerous whistleblowers in actions against the government and businesses. "I think sexual assault victims are a subclass, an important subclass, but I don't have any reason to think this is limited to them. Adam DeRito's medical records appear to be falsified."

Saying the Academy is "playing with people's lives," Rubenstein adds the practice of labeling people with mental diagnoses could be broader than is currently known. Former cadets may not be aware they, too, have had diagnoses added to their records, because they might not have seen those records. DeRito hadn't seen his until the National Guard requested them.

"I'm not sure there are words to describe how bad it is," Rubenstein says. "We're all fighting for the soul of the military, and the Air Force Academy doesn't have much of a soul. It's a machine. It's a closed machine, and when someone says things aren't working here, even if they're right, sometimes military leaders don't want to hear it and will discredit the source in order to keep on doing what they're currently doing."

Rubenstein also says he hopes the American Psychological Association will delve into the issue, as it eventually did after learning psychologists played a role in the nation's use of torture amid the War on Terror.

To make matters worse for DeRito, the Academy sent him a bill for \$168,000 to cover his education expense after being disenrolled. His paychecks have been garnished, but the debt will hang over his head for decades.

"Though I have a master's degree," he says, and a high-paying job, "I can't borrow \$5 because it's on my credit report."

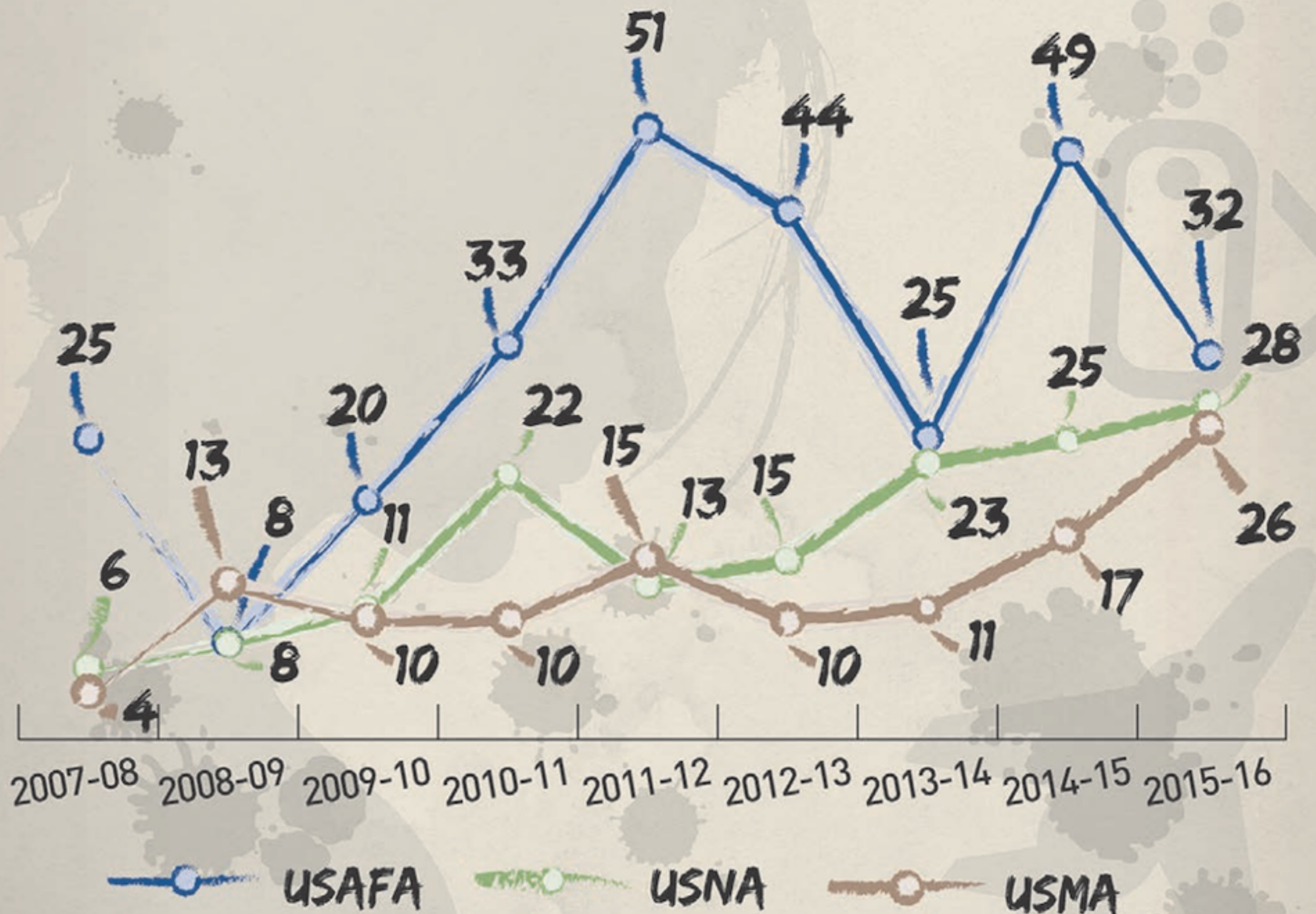
Sophia

"Sophia," who spoke on condition of anonymity because she's still a cadet at the Academy, now regrets reporting that she was sexually assaulted twice in 2014, because she's felt punished ever since.

"My biggest regret was coming forward, by far," she says. "I shouldn't have done it. I should have never said anything."

SEXUAL ASSAULTS

reported in the military academies



Data from Defense Department's 2015-16 Annual Report on Sexual Harassment and Violence at Military Service Academies.

Dustin Glatz

She reported the first sexual assault about a month after it happened in an unrestricted report, which means it was open to investigation and she was required to cooperate with OSI.

A couple of months later, she was sexually assaulted by another cadet, an athlete. That time, she made a restricted, or confidential, report the day after it happened, but later converted it to an unrestricted report under the advice of a helping agency.

The first sexual assault wasn't prosecuted, because Academy lawyers told her there wasn't enough evidence to convict. Sophia says the cadet later was disenrolled for fraternizing with underclassmen, but he avoided repaying the Academy for education costs by being allowed to enlist.

The second case resulted in charges, and the accused was court-martialed in 2016. Sophia says she was painted as a liar, and the cadet was acquitted. The day after, a

senior leader sent an email to the Cadet Wing announcing the verdict, she says, and another officer held a meeting of her squadron and revealed her name, later telling her, when she confronted him, "that's how it's done in the Air Force."

(Academy spokesman Lt. Col. Timothy Herritage says via email, "If an allegation was made that someone divulged the name of a victim, we would investigate and take appropriate action based on the particular facts.")

The Academy disenrolled the cadet post-trial due to academic performance, Sophia says. Meanwhile, Sophia says she received a letter of reprimand from the commandant, for regulation violations that came to light during the investigation and testimony of the first assault. She was placed on probation. As she progressed through her probation, her AOC urged her to leave the school.

About that same time, the Academy SAPR office told her that funding had been secured for her to attend a therapeutic retreat focused on military victims of sexual assault.

But her AOC wouldn't grant permission for her to leave campus to attend the event in California, she says.

In late 2016, her Academy psychologist updated her mental diagnosis from PTSD, which had been previously assigned to her after the sexual assaults, to a new diagnosis of "other specified personality disorder." The update was given to her over the phone by her Academy psychologist. It was the first time Sophia had ever heard the term, and she didn't know what it meant. (The American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic & Statistical Manual* states this category is for disorders of personality functioning that do not meet criteria for any specific personality disorder.) She did not understand the reason for the new diagnosis because she felt her original PTSD diagnosis was appropriate and accurately reflected her status at the time.

"[The Academy psychologist] explained that because of my history with sexual assault, in order to disenroll me, the Academy needed to look into my mental health and have approval from a higher authority beyond the Academy, such as an Air Force Medical Board," Sophia says.

After learning of the diagnosis, Sophia sought out testing, done at Peterson Air Force Base, which included an in-person interview and multiple lengthy personality assessments. She says the Peterson official told her, "There is nothing throughout my testing that indicated any type of personality disorder or any type of variation."

In the year after the court-martial, as pressure was continually placed on Sophia, she improved her performance and was removed from probation. She was returned to probation this year, however, after getting slapped with demerits for what she considered small infractions, and in May she was recommended for disenrollment.

But she was recently reinstated after she contacted a member of Congress, who in turn, she says, contacted superintendent Lt. Gen. Michelle Johnson, who has authority to halt a disenrollment action.


Sophia believes she was targeted because she reported being sexually assaulted, notably the case against the athlete. "After the court-martial, any little thing [and] I would get in trouble," she says. "It was like a never-ending cycle, because I reported it and went through the entire process. Most of my demerits have been given to me after the court-martial."

Sophia wanted to be a pilot but now wonders if the mental diagnosis will stand in her

way. Though she's heard Johnson say the Academy helps sexual assault victims, she says, "No, you don't help us stay here. You don't help us stay on our path that brought us to the Academy. This has been the worst period of my life since I came forward."

Because two of the three sexual assault victims featured in this article spoke to the *Indy* only if their identities were protected, the Academy couldn't be asked to address specific questions about those cases. Besides that, the Academy said privacy laws limit what it can say. But the *Indy* did ask about the DeRito case, and the Academy refused to discuss it without authorization from DeRito. As the *Indy* went to press, an agreement to allow the Academy to talk about his case was pending.

"These methods of retaliation are wounds against the soul."

[click to tweet](#) 

Asked to comment generally about claims that those reporting sexual assaults are labeled with a mental diagnosis and drummed out, the Academy said, "The Air Force will not discuss individual medical care unless required by law [or] other appropriate authority."

It added, "Leaders are extremely careful to create an environment that does not foster victim blaming, or the perception of victim blaming. Taking care of each other is part of who we are, and we go to great lengths to provide a culture rooted in the core principles of human dignity and respect for all cadets, faculty and staff."

In a 36-minute speech in March to community leaders on the state of the Academy, Lt. Gen. Johnson spent two minutes talking about sexual assault, noting first that the school is populated by 18- to 22-year-olds.

"We are not immune from social challenges, like sexual assault prevention," she said. "It's awful to talk about. We don't want to talk about it. But we can't fix some of these things unless we have these difficult conversations and say what are we talking about. We measure everything here. If somebody has unwanted contact from somebody, unwanted sexual contact, or if they're raped violently, we report all of that. So people see our numbers, and they don't like talking about it."

She also said the Academy is "owning this" and "talking about giving people tools to avoid those kinds of situations."

But the stories of Kristen, Adam and Sophia sound all too familiar to David Mullin, the aforementioned former Academy economics professor. Mullin won a disability discrimination settlement from the school after he left in 2011, and now teaches at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs.

For about a decade, Mullin has studied honor code violations, which led to a closer look at sexual assaults. He's zeroed in on the Defense Department's annual sexual assault data and found that, besides having the highest number of reports of the three military academies, the Academy shows sharp rises and drops in those numbers over the years, forming a sawtooth pattern in charts.

"Why the gyration? It doesn't make sense, given it's such a controlled environment," Mullin says. His research and the data led him to suspect the Academy might not be including all the reports in the Defense Sexual Assault Incident Database, the basis for

the annual reports. Mullin has since been in touch with numerous victims as part of his research, and he has created a complicated database that shows over the years many victims weren't believed, were assigned mental diagnoses after they reported, or were disenrolled. In short, he says, the Academy has a history of undermining the reputations of sexual assault victims.



Courtesy Human Rights Watch

Sara Darehshori worked on the Human Rights Watch report.

"The sexual assaults are wounds against the body," Mullin says. "These methods of retaliation are wounds against the soul."

Stamping people with a personality disorder marks them for life, says psychologist Fred Malmstrom of Colorado Springs, whose Air Force Academy honor code research has spanned decades and drawn attention at professional conferences.

Because there is no known treatment for personality disorder, often insurance companies and the Veterans Administration won't cover the expense of counseling.

Ironically, Malmstrom says, some traits of personality disorder — self-assuredness, refusal to admit being wrong and low tolerance for other people's rights and feelings — are present in fighter pilots, research shows. But to assign a personality disorder to a sexual assault victim, he says, "is what we call 'blaming the victim.' Women who get sexually assaulted in the military don't report it, because they won't be believed. To give somebody a personality disorder, it really kind of smells."

That rings true for Human Rights Watch (HRW), which issued a report in 2015 titled, *Embattled: Retaliation against Sexual Assault Survivors in the US Military*. Sara

Darehshori, HRW's senior counsel in New York, notes that people with mental health discharges aren't just denied benefits, but they also often find it impossible to get jobs or security clearances.

Moreover, she adds, PTSD is common for sexual assault victims, even higher than combat veterans, "so you may have a situation where you do have victims traumatized who are acting out in a way that's not understood by their commanders."

The organization's report said that while Defense Department instructions prohibit referring a service member for a mental health evaluation as reprisal for making a "protected communication" (i.e., a sexual assault or harassment report), it's seen by some as "the ultimate retaliation."

The fact is, the report says, commanders have full access to subordinates' medical records, including for mental health, to determine their fitness for duty. And given the mission of soldiers, sailors, marines and airmen, it serves a purpose for commanders to judge the stability of troops. But military members told HRW they "would never go to mental health" because it could lead to maltreatment, reassignment or discharge.

"In the service, kicking someone out for nondisability mental disorder is a quick way to get rid of someone," Darehshori says. "Many commanders do not view the rape victim as someone they want to support. The person is seen as a troublemaker."



Email

Print

Favorite

Share

More Cover Story »

SPEAKING OF...



Making education accessible
Sep 11, 2019



Joseph Shelton: Committed to community and lifting student voices
Sep 11, 2019



Trump has filled his government with swamp creatures
Sep 11, 2019



Harrison, PPCC and foundations team up on full-ride scholarships for hundreds of D-2 grads
Sep 4, 2019



South Park teachers may strike
Sep 3, 2019



Colorado College makes big move to help in-state students afford school
Aug 27, 2019

CURRENT ISSUE