Digital Policy Hub

Digital Policy Hub — Working Paper

Data Governance Avenues for Military Cultural Transformation

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About the Hub

The Digital Policy Hub at CIGI is a collaborative space for emerging scholars and innovative thinkers from the social, natural and applied sciences. It provides opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students and post-doctoral and visiting fellows to share and develop research on the rapid evolution and governance of transformative technologies. The Hub is founded on transdisciplinary approaches that seek to increase understanding of the socio-economic and technological impacts of digitalization and improve the quality and relevance of related research. Core research areas include data, economy and society; artificial intelligence; outer space; digitalization, security and democracy; and the environment and natural resources.

The Digital Policy Hub working papers are the product of research related to the Hub's identified themes prepared by participants during their fellowship.

Partners

Thank you to Mitacs for its partnership and support of Digital Policy Hub fellows through the Accelerate program. We would also like to acknowledge the many universities, governments and private sector partners for their involvement allowing CIGI to offer this holistic research environment.

About CIGI

The Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI) is an independent, non-partisan think tank whose peer-reviewed research and trusted analysis influence policy makers to innovate. Our global network of multidisciplinary researchers and strategic partnerships provide policy solutions for the digital era with one goal: to improve people's lives everywhere. Headquartered in Waterloo, Canada, CIGI has received support from the Government of Canada, the Government of Ontario and founder Jim Balsillie.

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Key Points

- The Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) is not able to accurately quantify the rate of sexual misconduct in the organization, nor the trends associated with it, despite several cycles of institutional reform in recent decades.

- Data fragmentation, poor data management, data not fit for purpose and a lack of accountability have obscured organizational knowledge on sexual misconduct, contributing to the "policy graveyard" phenomenon seen in recent attempts for military reform.

- The CAF must undertake a comprehensive audit of its data systems in order to integrate and repurpose its disjointed data assets.

- It must also adopt a comprehensive data governance strategy that will facilitate an organization-wide approach to sexual misconduct knowledge production.

- Stronger sexual misconduct data systems and data governance will directly contribute to success in institutional culture change, due to the critical function of analytics in organizational change processes.

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Military Sexual Violence and the Role of Data

There is a high cost to being a woman in the CAF. Long-standing structural and social features of the organization have resulted in an environment where sexual violence, harassment and discrimination against women are endemic. Scandals surrounding sexual misconduct — the official institutional term for sexual violence — have plagued the CAF in regular media cycles since the 1989 Canadian Human Rights Tribunal that imposed formal gender integration on the organization, legally requiring it to open all previously restricted positions to women.[1] These moments of intense public pressure have consistently resulted in government-mandated independent reviews into the organization and subsequent reports outlining recommendations for reform. Through the years, these external reviews have bled into one another, often sharing common critiques, recommendations and stressed need for change. The most recent iterations of this cycle, involving the reviews by Marie Deschamps (2015) and Louise Arbour (2022), have focused on culture change as the solution for systemic sexual violence.

This scandal-review-reform cycle has come to define organizational responses to sexual misconduct, as has the evident lack of progress between various periods of reform. To this end, scholars have identified a final stage in this persistent pattern: the policy graveyard (Wong and MacKenzie 2024). This concept describes how official reform commitments are often accepted as progress in and of themselves, with external reviews working to pacify public opinion on sexual misconduct as part of a "wait-out reformist impulse" that does not result in substantive change (Rimmer 2016, 415; Arbour

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1   With the exception of the submarine service, which remained closed to women until 2001.

2022). Here, inaction is legitimized through artificial commitments to change that take advantage of the ebb-and-flow nature of sexual misconduct media coverage.

A key element that allows the policy graveyard phenomenon to endure is the production and control of information on sexual misconduct in the CAF. The basis of change requires an understanding of the problem itself; thus, crucial to organizational reform is knowledge on the prevalence and foundations of systemic sexual misconduct. Data is fundamental to effecting change, in that it is able to inform policy, proactively identify root causes and risks, and track the translation of policy inputs to outlined culture change outcomes (Arbour 2022). Data governance — the practice of understanding organizational data, ensuring data quality and stewardship, curating data assets and leveraging data in a systematic manner — is especially important in the case of the CAF as a largely self-regulated organization uniquely exempt from the oversight to which other federal bodies are typically subject (Ferré 2022). While sexual misconduct data challenges have been noted in other militaries, countries such as Australia and the United States appear to be making far greater progress than Canada in addressing data governance issues (Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide 2024). This working paper demonstrates how CAF sexual misconduct data systems have evolved without an overarching governance framework, and how redressing this will be crucial for overcoming the policy graveyard phenomenon that has come to define institutional reform.

Evolution of Sexual Misconduct Data Practices

All reform periods in recent decades have been the direct result of media scandals that trigger the review, reform and policy graveyard cycle. Within this pattern, the CAF's operationalization and implementation of recommendations are largely hidden from public view (MacKenzie 2023). Despite several cycles of attempted reform, the CAF continues to find itself essentially in the same place it has occupied since the early days of gender integration — with evidence of widespread sexual violence through the organization, yet little ability to quantify its prevalence and ineffectual metrics through which to measure change.

Pre-Deschamps (1993–2014)

Prior to 2015, the CAF did not have any central database to record instances of sexual misconduct. Periodic and singular instances of public data offered concerning glimpses into the newly gender-integrated CAF: a 1992 Department of National Defence internal survey reported that 25 percent of servicewomen experienced sexual harassment at work, and the 1993 Canadian Human Rights Commission annual report revealed that they had received more sexual harassment complaints from the military than any other federal department (ibid.). Today, those rates and patterns remain largely consistent. While sexual misconduct scandals in the 1990s collectively articulated a systemic problem, the organization depicted the various high-profile cases as isolated incidents and refused to investigate the wider prevalence of sexual misconduct through formal data collection (Fish 2021).

Deschamps (2014–2016)

In 2015, the Deschamps external review noted data deficiencies as a key factor in the persistence of systemic sexual misconduct and outlined the creation of the Sexual Misconduct Support and Resource Centre (SMSRC), which would be the central authority for data collection and progress monitoring on culture change. In response to this mandated data collection, the CAF started a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for the tracking of sexual misconduct incidents. For two years, this spreadsheet was the primary, and only, organization-wide database on sexual misconduct; the methods of collection were never made public, nor were the aggregate rates it was intended to measure.[2]

In the years following, organizational data became increasingly fragmented by the launch of other data collection efforts that lacked an interoperable design.[3] Where organizational data and data governance on sexual violence prior to 2015 were non-existent, that which came after defied basic principles of data collection and offered only disparate, piecemeal glimpses of the larger picture.

In 2016, the CAF commissioned Statistics Canada to conduct the Sexual Misconduct in the Canadian Armed Forces (SSMCAF) voluntary survey, which measured personal or witnessed experiences of sexual misconduct and harassment. Data on respondents' demographics were collected alongside information on the circumstances of the incident. Despite important insights generated from this limited survey on sexual violence risk factors — such as the higher likelihood of victimization among Indigenous, disabled, queer and young service members — these findings have not been utilized to develop targeted prevention or culture change initiatives.

The SSMCAF has had lower participation rates each year it has been administered, with 61 percent in 2016, 52 percent in 2018 and 33 percent in 2022 for Regular Force personnel (Dursun 2023). The 2016 SSMCAF found that over a quarter of all women in the CAF had already been sexually assaulted in their careers and that members of the CAF were twice as likely to be sexually assaulted as members of the general population (Cotter 2016). Despite the importance of continuity in surveying, these two questions were removed from the 2018 and 2022 versions of the SSMCAF. This irregular, voluntary Statistics Canada survey arguably represents the most complete data source on sexual misconduct in the CAF.

Post-Deschamps (2016–2021)

In 2018, the Excel spreadsheet was replaced with the Sexual Misconduct Incident Tracking System (SMITS),[4] a reporting database that forms the CAF's primary tracker on sexual misconduct incidents and their outcomes. Significantly, SMITS only records cases reported by supervisors in the chain of command, meaning that the countless incidents that pursue various informal disclosure options, as with the SMSRC or CAF Health Services, or that take one of several other alternative reporting avenues, either within or outside the CAF, are not counted. Such a narrow perspective is concerning for a centralized database intended to be the principal source of organizational knowledge

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2   See www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/transparency/access-information-privacy/privacy-impact-assessment/operation-honour-tracking-analysis.html.

3   Ibid.

4   Initially called the Operation Honour Tracking Analysis System.

on sexual misconduct, as it unfortunately suggests that "if incidents are not in OPHTAS [renamed SMITS], they don't exist" (Arbour 2022, 55).

The CAF has not reckoned with this data design issue in the several years since SMITS' inception, despite other bodies, such as the Canadian Human Rights Commission, publicly releasing data on its own reports and disclosures of military sexual misconduct (Canadian Human Rights Commission 2024). Additionally, SMITS' limitations in light of military sexual misconduct underreporting estimates of up to 80 percent have gone unaccounted for by the CAF (Cotter 2016; Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide 2024). Even for SMITS-recorded incidents, 40 percent of cases on average lack critical information, with administrative and disciplinary actions representing the most incomplete data (Arbour 2022). Managers in the CAF still report minimal understanding on their responsibilities regarding reporting and tracking (ibid.). In sum, despite being the CAF's central source on sexual misconduct knowledge, SMITS continues to capture only a fraction of the incidents occurring in the organization. Curiously, the SMITS annual report has not been released since 2019. While the creation of a 2020 report was announced, it was not publicly released, nor has any other in the years since (ibid.).

Arbour (2021–present)

In 2021, CAF leadership announced that all of Deschamps' recommendations had been implemented, including empowering the SMSRC to function as the central data authority on sexual misconduct (Gallant 2021). In actuality, these changes still remain to be seen. Despite its intended data governance function, as well as its mandate to monitor organizational progress in addressing sexual misconduct, the centre does not have direct access to SMITS' database. The 2022 Arbour review was also denied access on privacy grounds that strictly prohibit the use of SMITS "for any purpose other than sexual misconduct incident recording, tracking and updating" (Arbour 2022, 57). This lack of reform has resulted in a significant analytics gap, as the wide net of information that SMITS captures cannot be used to model trends or inform decision making on culture change efforts.

Today, the CAF still does not have a means of accurately quantifying the prevalence of sexual misconduct in its organization. Existing data systems cannot provide an accurate estimate on rates of sexual assault, harassment or discrimination in the organization, and patterns in sexual misconduct administrative outcomes are still unclear despite nearly a decade of data collection. An adequate organization-wide data governance framework across disparate systems, one that is able to leverage existing and innovative data strategies to effectively inform and assess policy efforts, is sorely lacking.

Sexual Misconduct Data Realities Today

Data Fragmentation and Poor Data Management

At least 31 unique databases collect information on sexual misconduct, each designed, interpreted and managed by different internal CAF bodies.[5] Some of these sub-

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5   See www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/transition-materials/defence-101/2020/03/defence-101.html.

organizations are as localized as individual bases, while others collect data on behalf of the entire military police. Collectively, a significant amount of information related to complaints, charges and cases is captured; however, this information is disjointed and missing links to other parts of the CAF due to a lack of integration or interoperability (Arbour 2022; Fish 2021). These disparate data assets differ in their data quality, stewardship and platforms, and most were not designed to accommodate aggregate analysis (Burt 2021). Differences in incident definitions across databases, as well as various updates over time, have created discontinuity in information. One explanation for some sub-organizations' independent data collection is a reported dissatisfaction with SMITS (Arbour 2022). This lack of trust in the central database for sexual misconduct is of concern for an organization so reliant on formal reporting. Further, for senior military officers responsible for monitoring, improving and interpreting data, it is unclear what, if any, formal data management training they undergo prior to assuming their three-year postings.

Evidently, sexual misconduct data remains fragmented and poorly managed in the CAF. The current siloed model focused on achieving individual sub-organizational mandates does not facilitate an organization-wide picture of sexual misconduct. Despite a clear lack of progress on data deficiencies and repeated calls for improvement, military leaders have been unable to produce a system that reveals the sum of the numerous disjointed data assets. Without an automated mechanism for integration, fragmentation continues to impede the evaluation of prevention, detection and response measures (Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide 2024).

Data Not Fit for Purpose

Most of the CAF's sexual misconduct data assets are not designed for aggregate analytics, despite the monitoring and evaluation functions that databases such as SMITS were intended for. Privacy concerns have greatly restricted the utility of the already limited and fragmented data available. SMITS data downloads submitted to Louise Arbour were extensively redacted, resulting in a "deadlock" during her review (Arbour 2022, 57). While SMITS contains a range of information beneficial for analyzing trends and supporting evidence-based decision making on reform policy, its need-to-know access requirements have nullified this opportunity. This represents a significant barrier, as the CAF's principal data system for sexual misconduct does not have the ability to produce aggregate analytics — either for the public or for internal bodies charged with monitoring culture change and reform. Currently, existing data is not being effectively leveraged to inform culture change, nor are other data initiatives being launched to meet the information requirements of culture change indicators.

Lack of Accountability

Needed improvements in data quality, integration and management have been limited by a broader lack of accountability in culture change efforts. Reforming data systems and establishing formal data governance strategies have been announced in the SMSRC and SMITS annual reports and in official statements from CAF leaders to external review authorities and monitors — and yet there is consistently no follow-up to these commitments (Therrien 2024). For various databases, results are publicly released some years and not others, and are occasionally left in a period of indefinite delay, such as

with the 2020 SMITS report. Additionally, the results of certain surveys, such as those focused on sexual misconduct in military colleges, are exclusively briefed to what the CAF calls "key stakeholders" (Dursun 2023, 17). Even the *Comprehensive Implementation Plan 2023–2028*, which outlines culture change recommendations consolidated from Deschamps, Arbour and a number of other external reviewers, has only one explicitly data-focused recommendation: "becom[ing] a data-driven organization" (Department of National Defence 2024, 23). While this directive was scheduled to be completely implemented by December 2024, no further details on its execution are available.

A lack of accountability is both a cause and a consequence of data deficiencies in the CAF, and highly consequential delays in data systems improvement have led to a lack of reliable analytics on sexual misconduct. These delays result in a loss on two fronts, where both the retrospective and the proactive requirements for reliable data compound in a vicious cycle. Without an accessible buildup of analytics on sexual misconduct over time, the CAF's ability to problem solve is hindered by a limited understanding of the historical extent and root causes of the issue. Further, targeted solutions and reform efforts cannot be assessed, as baseline, target and progress metrics on sexual misconduct remain unclear.

Data and the Persistence of Harmful Institutional Culture

The evolution and present realities of sexual misconduct data governance in the CAF signal at best a lack of commitment to culture change and at worst "a concerted effort to obscure the extent of the problem" (MacKenzie 2023, 44). Ultimately, poor data collection, design and governance have limited the CAF's ability to ascertain the extent of sexual misconduct in the organization as well as the impact of policy efforts, making the CAF a key example of the policy graveyard phenomenon that has come to define organizational responses to systemic sexual misconduct.

As a largely self-administered organization, the CAF is permitted to interpret and implement mandated reform recommendations independently, further stressing the need for reliable and accessible data assets on sexual misconduct. These assets would discipline the organization's historic wait-out reformist approach, as a consistent record of analytics would establish an irrefutable report card that would keep the CAF answerable to its official commitments to change. Delayed progress in this realm directly translates to delayed progress in broader culture change, as the CAF is unable to quantify how policy is translating to behaviour. Without data, activity has and will continue to be construed for impact.

Recommendations

- **An external audit of CAF sexual misconduct data systems:** A mixed team of data science and culture change experts should be appointed in order to identify integration and interoperation strategies, with the aim of establishing a centralized data asset representative of the sum of the organization's various existing sexual misconduct databases. Similar to the Canadian Military Colleges Review Board, this audit committee should be authorized to assess if the CAF should continue to be held solely responsible for achieving data reform requirements. While remaining sensitive to privacy concerns, this audit should investigate the possible analytical benefits of establishing an interdepartmental data integration structure that would align CAF

data assets, design and security infrastructure with other bodies such as Statistics Canada and the Canadian Human Rights Commission.

- **Increased emphasis on sexual misconduct data governance strategies:** There is an apparent need to establish accountability and continuity in sexual misconduct data management in a way that translates to mandated culture change. Institutional investment in project management capabilities and stronger executive sponsorship would strengthen governance and accountability for databases relative to reform efforts, specifically SMITS. This investment could also be supported by an update to the Department of National Defence/CAF Data Strategy,[6] which currently lacks any consideration of misconduct data, to establish strategies for better data stewardship practices that are resilient to the impacts of staff overturn in the three-year posting cycle system. The recently revived Defence Data Ethics Board presents as another opportunity to establish data governance strategies beneficial to institutional reform through an organization-wide approach. Data governance also needs to become a better resourced, more central pillar of SMSRC's activities.

- **Fit-for-purpose data systems:** While existing data systems collect a wide range of information highly relevant to sexual misconduct trends and analytics, they have not translated into more comprehensive organizational knowledge on sexual misconduct. Demographics and incident circumstance data from the SSMCAF and SMITS should be utilized to identify high-risk groups and military environments that can inform targeted policy responses. Data on chain-of-command reported instances of sexual misconduct offers only a partial account of institutional realities; augmenting this data with the various other reporting and disclosure avenues, as well as with holistic estimates on no-action incidents, would provide a helpful organization-wide picture and benchmark from which to measure sexual misconduct reform. Data assets must align with the framework of culture change indicators; for example, the SMSRC should have access to personnel training data alongside perpetrator data to assess whether professional conduct and culture education programming is resulting in lower likelihoods of committing sexual misconduct. Data collection must be more extensive and, for assets that already exist, this data must be leveraged in a way that is more conducive to knowledge generation on culture change.

Acknowledgements

About the Author

Caleigh Wong is a Digital Policy Hub master's fellow and currently pursuing her master's in political science at McGill University on a 2023 McCall MacBain scholarship. She is a graduate of an international development studies and civil engineering concurrent degrees program from Dalhousie University. As a former member of the CAF, Caleigh has focused her research on organizational culture change and military sexual violence; she has testified as a witness on parliamentary studies, addressed the prime minister and published work on the subject of

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6   See www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/data-strategy/data-strategy.html.

Canadian military culture. Currently, she is investigating how organizational culture impacts data management in sexual violence tracking, monitoring and reporting.

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