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The United States Military Recruiting Crisis

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April 2, 2025





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Introduction

Recent news stories reported that the U.S. military is currently experiencing an unprecedented recruiting crisis.ⁱ In fact, between 2022-2023, the U.S. armed forces (the Army in particular) failed to meet their numbers by a large margin: against goals of 232,021 accessions for 2022 and 244,533 for 2023, the branches collectively missed their targets by 40,369 and 41,336 accessions respectively.ⁱⁱ Even though the branches proved able to meet their recruitment goals – although barely – in fiscal year 2024, concerns continue to linger.ⁱⁱⁱ

Although military recruitment is usually not a significant issue for voters, it became a central promise for the new Trump administration.^{iv} Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth is following through with his promise to take action, beginning with policy changes related to diversity initiatives in the military, which he argues have dampened recruitment enthusiasm.^v

The recruiting crisis in context

The U.S. began experiencing personnel issues following its decision to move away from a conscripted military to an “All-Volunteer Force” (AFV) in 1973. The U.S. military suffered a serious recruitment shortfall following the Vietnam War due to the national disillusionment the conflict had caused.^{vi} While diminished global commitments throughout the late 1970s and 1980s likewise reduced normal U.S. military personnel needs, moments of patriotic fervor, such as during the First Gulf War (1990-1991) provided the personnel needed for major mobilizations. Although Legal Permanent Residents (LPRs, the technical term for immigrants possessing a “Green Card”) contributed substantially to the U.S. military in the late 1990s, tepid enlistment rates among U.S. citizens warned of an impending crisis.

The aftermath of 9/11 led many Americans to enlist to fight in the Global War on Terror. However, the prolonged conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq cooled Americans’ interest in enlisting, revealing a creeping recruiting crisis.^{vii}

In 2005, Senator John McCain and others began to express concerns for dwindling numbers of recruits and for how the Army had lowered standards by accepting recruits without high school diplomas or who had scored in the lowest category of the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB).^{viii} To improve the quality and quantity of recruits, the Department of Defense (DoD) adopted three tactics that have since become the core of recruiting to this day: hiring

more recruiters; stronger enlistment incentives; and more targeted advertising focusing on “influencers” – parents, relatives, and friends with connections to the military.^{ix}

While all branches seemed able to satisfy their accession goals after these measures were implemented, it later emerged that success came at the cost of potential decline in quality as they had granted the highest number of “moral” waivers to recruits since the 1970s, allowing applicants to enlist despite having criminal records.^x While the trend of satisfactory – though not excellent – accession rates and questionable standards continued, the 2008 economic crisis benefitted the U.S. armed forces. In fact, job security and a 2.9% pay increase in the military attracted many individuals.^{xi}

The hefty bill of recruitment

As the U.S. economy picked up again during the 2010s and early 2020s, success margins for recruiting goals began to decrease while recruiting expenses rose.^{xii} Enlistment or retention bonuses now feature among the most common tactics to obtain new personnel or convince active personnel to stay. The branches allocated a total of \$5.25 billion in recruiting and retention efforts and bonuses for FY 2025.^{xiii} The Army alone spent \$1.78 billion, a substantial increase from 2007, when the branch spent \$1.12 billion, but a massive one compared to 2001, when it spent only \$278.8 million (around \$500 million in 2025 adjusted for inflation).^{xiv}

Recruiting efforts cannot be separated from pay raises, given the strict relation between recruitment and retention. In 1973, Congress authorized U.S. military personnel to receive a pay raise of at least 1% every year. However, this raise – also coming with increases in housing and subsistence allowances – has consistently surpassed 4% for the past three years, with the 2024 increase being particularly substantial at 5.2%.^{xv} Therefore, it is not surprising that military personnel budget allocations – which include recruiting and retention programs and compensation – have continued to increase. Compared to compensation in the civilian job market, U.S. military compensation currently stands at the 82nd-83rd percentile for enlisted personnel, and 76th percentile for officers.^{xvi} Overall the Pentagon’s military personnel budget allocation has grown to almost \$182 billion for FY 2025 only to recruit 7,800 people less than last fiscal year.^{xvii}

The causes of the recruiting crisis

The sources of the current recruiting crisis are several and, often interconnected. U.S. military recruiters’ inability to

conduct regular, in-person recruiting at “career centers” and public events during the COVID pandemic took a toll on their efforts.^{xxviii} However, the root causes are deeper.

American civil society no longer views military service as a rite of passage or as a debt citizens owe to the nation, taking away the greatest recruiting advantage of the U.S. military had over any other civilian private employer.^{xix} As a result, salary and benefits, work-life balance, and organizational culture now constitute major factors in motivating enlistment. Moreover, the switch to an AVF created a military in which currently only 0.4% of the U.S. population serves.^{xx} Since 1973, fewer and fewer Americans experienced military service, deepening the divide between civil society and the military. This widespread lack of familiarity with military service disincentivizes older individuals to recommend it as a career to their younger peers, even when it does not translate into actively discouraging it.^{xxi} Meanwhile, the desire to pursue an advanced education also leads young Americans away from the military, particularly women, for whom there are also concerns relating to discrimination and sexual harassment.^{xxii}

The bloody and largely unsuccessful U.S. involvements in both Afghanistan and Iraq disabused many Americans of the notions of war as a noble endeavor.^{xxiii} Compared to 1984 when the propensity for service stood at 24%, the current rate is at about 9% for both men and women and its decline has been one of the leading causes for mediocre rates of enlistment in the U.S. military over the recent years.^{xxiv} Obviously, service members are extremely important actors in influencing enlistment rates. However, the U.S. military’s hierarchical and bureaucratic nature structure, incompatibility with modern life, ideals of stability, along with a growing politicization of its leaders and a perception of declining professional standards, negatively impacts their satisfaction.

Struggling to attract new recruits, the U.S. military has progressively fallen back on areas like the South, the Rust Belt, and military families-- which are traditionally more responsive to recruitment. Although convenient in the immediate term, reliance on these areas and social groups creates a fragile dependency on a narrow demographic section that is threatened by dwindling retainment rates and disaffection toward service in the U.S. armed forces.

On top of cultural and variable dynamics that influence recruitment is a small and ever-shrinking pool of eligible applicants due to demographic factors, like the ageing of the U.S. population. Additionally, the following years will feel the effect of the low birth rates that occurred simultaneously to the 2008 economic crisis and the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic to further reduce the recruiting pool available.^{xxv}

An equally relevant, and more disturbing, cause for the recruiting crisis has been the inability of large numbers of applicants to meet the minimum standards for enlistment, most

notably regarding health, education, and criminal records. A 2020 study commissioned by the DoD found that 77% of Americans aged 17 to 24 (the core recruitment age) could not qualify for service without a waiver of some kind.^{xxvi} This indicated a decline from 71% in 2013 and that from a pool of almost 33 million, only 7.6 million would be eligible to enlist.^{xxvii} The situation indicates steadily worsening levels of health, education, and criminality among a population that already does not show interest in choosing a military career. Insofar, the branches have only implemented short-term workarounds to source the necessary personnel. While granting medical waivers for some conditions may be justified, accepting applicants with substandard education or granting of moral waivers for misdemeanors and felonies is hardly a sustainable solution. In fact, this practice introduces unqualified elements in the U.S. armed forces, impacting quality as well as its perception among serving members. Even if issuing waivers and enlisting individuals without high school degrees has not reached the 2006 levels, this practice has been on the rise in recent years, particularly in the Army.^{xxviii}

The attempted solutions

Interestingly, the Army and the Navy created a workaround to address the recruiting crisis by developing academic and fitness preparatory courses to bring prospective applications up to minimum standards who scored immediately below them. First implemented in 2023, the Future Soldier Preparatory Course, and, later, the Future Sailor Preparatory Course brought in enough recruits to the Army and the Navy that both branches were able to satisfy their goals in 2024.^{xxix} However, the declining education and health levels of the nation evidence the hollowness of this solution, as these programs will be able to meet reasonable numbers of applicants only for so long. This program was not adopted by the Air Force, who felt safe from a lack of willing volunteers thanks to the attractiveness of its technologically advanced aircrafts, even if in 2023 it also failed to meet its accession targets since 1999.^{xxx}

Amongst all this, the U.S. Marine Corps – which has consistently met its recruiting goals – is a rare bright spot in a bleak picture. The cultivated image of the Marines as the nation’s supreme fighting force, uncompromising in its quality standards, attracts the largest number of candidates in proportion to its size. Additionally, the U.S. Space Force has been able to satisfy its very modest recruiting goals since its establishment in 2019, perhaps thanks to an aura of novelty.^{xxxi}

Balancing ideals, feasibility, and effectiveness

The lack of a permanent, Congress-confirmed Under Secretary for Defense, Personnel and Readiness (USD(P&R)) for several years has hindered the adoption of more uniform recruiting policies that could help branches meet accession goals. For instance, the Air Force has not adopted preparatory courses based on the model of the Army and the Navy despite their advantages. Meanwhile, all branches hesitate to invest in

social media outreach tactics due to the lack of a clear engagement policy by the DoD. Clearer direction from the Office of the USD(P&R) could finally come with a permanent Under Secretary and a staff directly acting under congressional mandate to resolve the recruiting crisis.^{xxxii}

However, these methods neither expand the shrinking recruiting pool nor improve its quality. An enormous human resource has been one of the foundations of American military forces for over two hundred years, but no longer represented, are non-citizens lawfully living in the U.S. In addition to U.S. nationals and some citizens of U.S. territories and countries closely associated to the U.S. like the Federated States of Micronesia, Legal Permanent Residents have almost always been allowed to enlist throughout American history, which was codified for all branches through the National Defense Authorization Act of 2006.^{xxxiii}

However, immigration policy over the last twenty-five years has tended to restrict permanent immigration to the U.S., particularly for foreigners without U.S. citizen relatives or seeking refugee status, such as temporary visitors already in the country for reasons of study or work.^{xxxiv} Over half a million recipients of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), individuals who were brought to the U.S. as minors, have few chances to adjust their status into permanent residency and are therefore ineligible to enlist, despite being authorized to work in the U.S. Amendments to present legislation either in terms of immigration policy or enlistment regulations to authorize otherwise qualified non-citizens in the U.S. would address the root issue of the recruiting crisis by expanding the recruiting pool. By framing military service as a potential pathway for permanent residency and ultimately citizenship, the U.S. could find a long-term solution for its recruitment woes by appealing to individuals who are often

skilled, well-educated, healthy and willing to serve their adoptive Nation. Additionally, such legislative measures could solve the continuing temporary protected status of DACA recipients as well prevent future illegal immigration through visa overstay by temporary visitors, who account for about 40% of illegal immigration totals.^{xxxv}

Ideally, addressing the root causes of the present recruiting crisis would be best, but solving issues like worsening education, health, and rising criminality among the American youth is neither easy nor quick. While short-term measures like preparatory courses should be implemented, policymakers need to adopt feasible and effective long-term solutions that tackle rather than cope with the problem of an ever shrinking and increasingly uninterested or qualified recruiting pool and restore interest in military service.

Decision Points

- Should the Army, Navy, and Air Force adopt counterintuitive approaches—such as uncompromising standards—similar to the Marine Corps when recruiting, even if they do not position themselves as the nation's primary "warriors"?
- Is a new, permanent, Congress-confirmed Under Secretary for Defense, Personnel & Readiness necessary to oversee recruiting efforts, provide clear direction, and ensure competent leadership in implementing effective policies?
- Should immigration laws or enlistment regulations be amended to allow military branches to recruit skilled non-citizens, particularly DACA recipients?

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Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Sarah Brown, MPAP, Jeffrey Rogg, PhD, JD and Heather Ward, MLIS for their expert review and editing of this manuscript.

Disclaimer: This document was prepared by the Global and National Security Institute (GNSI) at the University of South Florida (USF). GNSI Decision Briefs aim to inform the reader on a particular policy issue to enhance decision-making while proposing the questions policymakers need to address. The analysis and views presented here belong to the author(s) and do not represent the views of the United States Agency for International Development, Department of Defense or its components or the USF administration or its components.

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