

# Improving America’s Long-Term Military Recruiting Outlook

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

America depends on a strong military to implement its foreign policy and protect its vital interest, and this requires a substantial number of volunteers annually.

Unless America counteracts negative recruiting trends, the future strength of the U.S. military—and thus the security of the nation—is likely to be compromised.

Congress and the executive branch should act now to ensure that the military has the manpower it needs—not wait until this is a full-blown national security crisis.

Every indicator of future U.S. military recruiting success is either trending negatively or remaining stagnant. These indicators include demographics, the economy, youth health, and trends that influence propensity to serve, including civic education, the number of veterans in America, the value of the military education benefit, the public’s perception of the military, and the percentage of youth that attend college immediately after high school.

*Unless America takes decisive action to counteract negative recruiting trends, the future strength of the U.S. military—and thus the security of the nation—is likely to be compromised.*

America depends on a strong military to implement its foreign policy and protect its vital interests. A substantial number of volunteers is needed annually to meet the necessary service end strengths. In 2020,

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This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/bg3657>

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the military enlisted 157,896 individuals for active duty, and more were recruited for the reserve components. Recent signs, however, indicate that military recruiting is becoming increasingly difficult. In 2018, despite putting \$200 million into bonuses, the Army missed its recruiting goal by over 6,000.<sup>1</sup> For some reason, and without any explanation, the Army has not released its annual recruiting goals for subsequent years.<sup>2</sup>

As part of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017, largely as a response to declining public service trends, Congress established a National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service.<sup>3</sup> In its final report, that commission alarmingly found that “current trends in propensity and eligibility endanger the health of the All-Volunteer Force.”<sup>4</sup>

Other nations have already been dealing with the same challenges that the U.S. is just now beginning to face. Developed nations that depend on conscription or volunteers to serve in their militaries are experiencing problems filling their ranks. For example:

- Sweden brought back a military draft in 2018 after finding it difficult to attract volunteers.<sup>5</sup>
- Similarly, Lithuania brought back conscription in 2015.<sup>6</sup>
- South Korea depends on mandatory service to fill its military ranks, but because its population is in decline, its military will be one-sixth smaller in 2021 than it has been in recent years.<sup>7</sup>
- Taiwan’s military readiness plummeted following its decision to change its conscription period of service from one year to four months in 2017. Only 81 percent of its military positions are filled.<sup>8</sup>

Unless other lower-cost solutions are found, recruiting challenges could translate into either shortages in the ranks or the need to spend vastly increased amounts of money on pay and bonuses to incentivize volunteers.

The U.S. is furiously racing to adapt to the challenges of the 21st century with such great powers as China and Russia. Efforts are well underway to field new weapons such as lasers, hypersonic missiles, and cyber tools. Yet to a great degree, the U.S. military still employs an industrial-age approach to recruiting.

There are solutions if America approaches this issue seriously. Approximately 4.2 million Americans turned 18 in 2019.<sup>9</sup> Of that number, America needs only about 5 percent to serve in the military, and not all need to be

18-year-olds. By acting to reverse trends that are disqualifying youth from serving, increasing civic education, reimagining existing recruiting tools, and engaging America's youth earlier and in a more comprehensive manner, we can avoid this problem and preserve America's national security.

## The All-Volunteer Force and the Enduring Need for New Volunteers

On September 28, 1971, President Richard Nixon signed legislation that committed the nation to an all-volunteer force by 1973. Since that time, with the exception of several years when recruiting efforts fell short, the military has largely been successful in persuading sufficient numbers of Americans with the necessary qualifications to join the military.<sup>10</sup> The years when the military failed to attract sufficient volunteers correspond to periods when military pay and benefits were not rapidly responsive to increases in civilian opportunities sparked by the information and technology boom of the 1990s (1999); casualties in an ongoing conflict were perceived to be high (2005); the economy was robust (2018); or various combinations of some of these factors.

Rather than continue to recruit large numbers annually, some argue that other options would allow the U.S. military to reduce its needs. These options include:

- **Reducing** the overall size of the military,
- **Substituting** robots for servicemembers where appropriate,
- **Trading** people for higher-technology equipment,
- **Increasing** the retention of current servicemembers, or
- **Returning** to conscription.

In reality, however, none of these represents a viable alternative to the requirement that current levels of recruiting be maintained.

**Reducing the Overall Size of the Military.** In 2020, the active components of the U.S. military were authorized slightly more than 1.3 million servicemembers, and the reserve components were authorized almost 802,000.<sup>11</sup> While this may seem like—and is—a lot, the military has been much bigger in recent times: In 1990 at the end of the Cold War, the active-duty force alone numbered 2 million.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, the U.S. does not have the largest military force. Two other countries have more active-duty servicemembers: China (2.1 million) and India (1.44 million). Just below the U.S., the Russian Federation has 1 million, and North Korea has 950,000.<sup>13</sup> Although the size of the U.S. military has fluctuated because of wars and changing perceptions of national security, the trend over the past two decades has been markedly downward: By 2015, the U.S. military had steadily been cut to the point where it was the lowest it had been since 1940.<sup>14</sup> Only since 2016 has the military begun to grow again, albeit modestly, and the Biden Administration's fiscal year (FY) 2022 defense budget proposes to start shrinking the active military again by almost 5,000 in one year.<sup>15</sup>

There is recognition in many quarters that the U.S. military has shrunk too far.<sup>16</sup> The 2017 National Security Strategy of the United States acknowledged this fact when it stated that “[t]he size of our force matters.... The United States must reverse recent decisions to reduce the size of the Joint Force and grow the force while modernizing and ensuring readiness.”<sup>17</sup> Although financially constrained, all of our military services (except the Marine Corps) aspire to increase the size of their respective forces so that they will be able to accomplish its missions more effectively.

Regarding the threats facing the nation, in 2018, the bipartisan congressional commission charged with reviewing the 2017 National Defense Strategy concluded: “The United States thus confronts more numerous—and more severe—threats than at any time in decades.”<sup>18</sup> Absent some unanticipated tectonic shift or a major change in strategy, the world situation and threats facing the United States do not suggest that America can make do with a smaller military.

### **Substituting Robots for Servicemembers Where Appropriate.**

Could automation and artificial intelligence reduce the need for large numbers of costly, hard-to-recruit servicemembers? Imaginative writers have speculated that by 2062, wars will be fought by “killer robots,” freeing humans from the need to deploy and fight.<sup>19</sup> Alas, such predictions remain the province of fiction.

Real-life experimentation indicates that robots can indeed free humans from tedious, dangerous, and repetitive tasks but that the wholesale replacement of servicemembers is unlikely. The military may find that some replacement is possible, but it cannot assume that this will change the recruiting calculus. In fact, early insights are that a robot-equipped force may initially need *more*—not fewer—personnel to operate and maintain new systems. A robot-equipped force would also need individuals of higher technical qualification.<sup>20</sup>

**Trading People for Higher-Technology Equipment.** Related to the use of robots is the argument that the U.S. military will be able to trade large numbers of people for smaller numbers of high-tech automated platforms and achieve the same overall effects. But while attractive, this argument is not likely to yield significant personnel savings.

Our adversaries are also modernizing their inventories, so an American military equipped with a smaller number of highly lethal platforms could well have to face an adversary that is similarly equipped but with more systems. Moreover, the services are struggling to find ways to automate many warfighting tasks. In the case of the ill-fated Littoral Combat Ship, there were hopes that the crew could be limited to 40 people using automation. Instead, the Navy found that the crews were overworked and inefficient.<sup>21</sup>

**Increasing the Retention of Current Servicemembers.** An alternative to the need for a large annual intake of new volunteers is to retain more servicemembers who are already in the military. If the military, for example, were able to retain 100 percent of the individuals already serving, it theoretically could maintain its end strength.

The military does resort to this tactic when faced with a tough patch of recruiting,<sup>22</sup> but this is a short-term fix with long-term consequences. There is a defined pyramid of rank structure in the military that is distorted when the steady input of new servicemembers needed to fill junior positions is interrupted for even a few months. The services need vast amounts of junior people and much fewer senior individuals. Some modification to rank structures could be made that would require changes in personnel and compensation policies, but in the end, no one would argue that it is in the military's best interest to have their ranks filled with 40-year-olds.

**Returning to Conscription.** Despite the years 1999, 2005, and 2018 when the Department of Defense (DOD) missed its recruiting targets, the all-volunteer force has met the nation's needs. Not only has the department met numerical goals, but by every measure—including number of high school graduates, intelligence, and experience—the quality of the force has improved.<sup>23</sup> Conversely, contrary to popular culture, conscription is not an American tradition. The U.S. has used conscription for only 35 of its 245 years.<sup>24</sup>

Philosophy aside, however, because of the high turnover associated with conscription (conscripts typically serve no more than two years and usually less while volunteers serve three to four years), a military consisting of volunteers will normally be better trained, more physically fit, and of overall higher quality. Conscript forces have consistently proven to be less motivated, proficient, and ready—all current comparative strengths of the U.S. military.<sup>25</sup>

Because American forces must plan, especially initially, to fight outnumbered in faraway lands, the importance of a qualitatively better military is one of the cornerstones of the U.S. national security strategy.<sup>26</sup> Unless the nation can tolerate a more poorly trained and less motivated military force, conscription does not hold the answer to a long-term U.S. recruiting challenge.

Thus, short of a change in U.S. national strategy that emphasizes a less ambitious foreign policy, there are no immediate prospects, whether through geopolitical development, the advent of technology, or new personnel policies, to suggest that the United States will be able to reduce to any significant extent its enduring need for citizens to join and serve in the military in numbers similar to the numbers that are needed today.

## Understanding the Recruiting Environment

The DOD devotes considerable effort to understanding the current recruiting environment. The Joint Advertising, Market Research and Studies (JAMRS) office under the Pentagon's Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness routinely conducts market research, studies, and surveys to understand current trends and perceptions. One of its main areas of interest is the perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes of American youth. JAMRS periodically surveys youth about their potential propensity to serve in the military. Another main area of inquiry is the views of "influencers" of American youth like parents, grandparents, and teachers and the likelihood of their recommending military service.<sup>27</sup> This office also periodically looks at the trends that disqualify youth from service.<sup>28</sup>

Each military service maintains an internal capability to conduct market research to support its own recruiting activities. The Army, for example, maintains an Army Enterprise Marketing Office, based in Chicago, Illinois, to help craft recruiting campaigns and strategies.<sup>29</sup>

The DOD also makes extensive use of studies performed by federally funded research and development centers (FFRDCs) such as the RAND Corporation's National Defense Research Institute to assist in tailoring recruiting programs to the current environment.<sup>30</sup> Over time, the DOD has developed a sophisticated understanding of the relationship between pay, bonuses, the unemployment rate, and recruiting challenges.<sup>31</sup> In response to these indicators, it attempts to adjust near-term levers to achieve recruiting success. These levers include recruiting bonuses, numbers of recruiters, willingness to grant waivers, and the initiation of special recruiting programs such as the Army's eSports recruiting team.<sup>32</sup>

Because of its importance to day-to-day operations, the DOD, FFRDCs, and service recruiting organizations focus on solving the near-term challenge of satisfying DOD recruiting goals. Relatively few organizations examine the longer-term recruiting environment. Moreover, the variables for estimating recruiting challenges rely on short-term indicators. The RAND Corporation, for example, which is one of the leading recruiting research centers, is able to make “recruiting difficulty forecasts” only for periods “up to 24 months into the future.”<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps inevitably, therefore, the occasional strategic examinations of future recruiting fail to translate long-term recruiting challenges into law and policy changes. This is significant because, although understanding the near-term environment is indeed important to the current readiness of the force, failure to prepare for the possibility of a future recruiting environment that is radically more challenging could result in mission failure. Some adjustments may take years to put in place, and the sooner the nation begins to adjust, the less likely it is to experience a shortfall.

## Long-Term Trends Suggest Greater Difficulty and Higher Costs

The techniques used to predict long-term recruiting success are different from those used in near-term forecasts. Short-term forecasts use surveys and current data; long-term forecasting requires examination of demographic, economic, and public health trends as well as factors that influence propensity (willingness) to serve such as civic engagement and exposure to veterans.

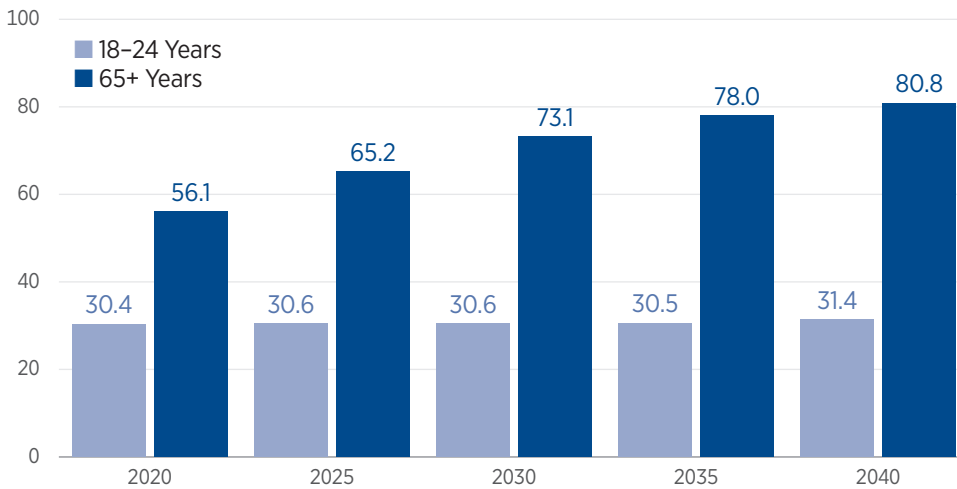
**Demographic Trends.** At a time when other developed nations are experiencing population shrinkage, U.S. Census Bureau projections reflect an 18-year-old through 24-year-old American population of 30.4 million that will grow by 3 percent to 31.4 million by 2040. However, because our overall population is aging, this key age group represents a smaller slice of our total population, moving from 9 percent to 8 percent of the total.<sup>34</sup> The implication is that this smaller segment, like their cohorts in the 25-year-old to 64-year-old slice, will be supporting greater numbers of aging Americans by their efforts, which suggests in turn that they could be prompted to forgo military service in lieu of more lucrative opportunities.

The U.S. fertility rate was already at a record low before the COVID-19 pandemic. The replacement rate (the rate at which the population replaces itself) is 2.1. Currently, the U.S. fertility rate stands at 1.6, a historic low. The biggest driver behind this trend is women giving birth later in life.<sup>35</sup>

CHART 1

## Projected Age Groups for the U.S. Population Through 2040

IN MILLIONS OF U.S. CITIZENS



**SOURCE:** Table 2, “Projected Age Groups and Sex Composition of the Population: Projections for the United States: 2017–2060,” revised release date September 2018, in U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau, “2017 National Population Projections Tables: Main Series,” <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/popproj/tables/2017/2017-summary-tables/np2017-t2.xlsx> (accessed August 31, 2021).

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Significantly, the U.S. Census Bureau reports that in 2030, immigration will overtake natural growth (births minus deaths) as the impetus for population growth in the United States.<sup>36</sup>

Overall, these trends suggest two things:

- The prime recruiting population will not grow appreciably while simultaneously needing to support a growing percentage of older Americans, and
- Immigrants will make up an ever-increasing share of the recruitable population.

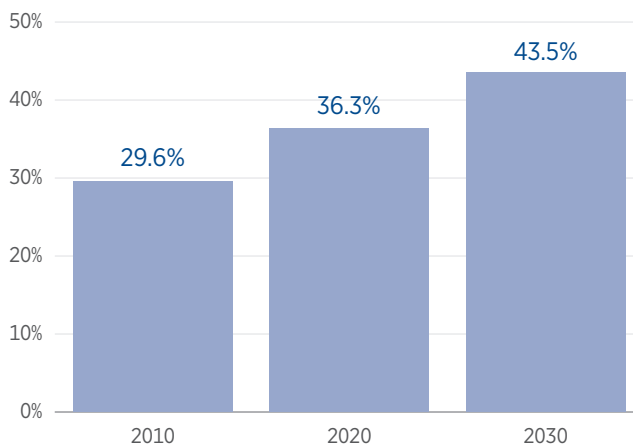
**Eligibility Trends.** The DOD conducts studies to determine the percentage of youth that qualify for military service based on standards of education, health, and crime records. The most recent publicly released data from September 2016 reflect that only 29 percent of youth meet all of the core eligibility requirements without a waiver.<sup>37</sup>



CHART 2

## Obesity Rates in the U.S. Expected to Rise

OBESITY RATES FOR ADULTS, AGE 18-39



**SOURCE:** Table 8.1.14, “Obesity Prevalence: Age 18–39,” in Zachary J. Ward, Sara N. Bleich, Angie L. Craddock, Jessica L. Barrett, Catherine M. Giles, Chasmine Flax, Michael W. Long, and Steven L. Gortmaker, “Projected U.S. State-Level Prevalence of Adult Obesity and Severe Obesity,” *New England Journal of Medicine*, Vol. 381, No. 25 (December 19, 2019), Supplemental Appendix, p. 96, [https://www.nejm.org/doi/suppl/10.1056/NEJMsa1909301/suppl\\_file/nejmsa1909301\\_appendix.pdf](https://www.nejm.org/doi/suppl/10.1056/NEJMsa1909301/suppl_file/nejmsa1909301_appendix.pdf) (accessed August 31, 2021).

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The root causes of this failure among American youth to qualify for military service are beyond the scope of this paper and have been addressed elsewhere.<sup>38</sup> This paper examines the long-term trends and their impact on recruiting. While it is difficult to discern trends in the disqualifying factors of crime and education, there are clear trends in the medical and health areas. Specifically, between 2010 and 2014, the top four medically disqualifying conditions were:

- Weight (17 percent);
- Psychiatric (12 percent);
- Vision (11 percent); and
- Skin/allergies (9 percent).<sup>39</sup>

Negative trends for obesity and youth mental illness in particular are troubling and suggest that a smaller percentage of youth will qualify to join the military by 2030.

**Obesity.** Obesity continues to increase in America; it is predicted that by 2030, 43.5 percent of adults will be obese. Among U.S. adolescent children aged 10–19, obesity is predicted to be 24.2 percent by 2030, up from 21 percent in 2017.<sup>40</sup>

**Youth Mental Health.** Youth mental illness, the number three cause of medical disqualification, is being diagnosed at an increasing rate.<sup>41</sup> During the period from 2008 to 2018, mental illness rose faster among 18-year-olds through 25-year-olds than among adults. In 2008, 19.1 percent of adults 18 years old through 25 years old experienced mental illness; by 2018, that number was 26.3 percent.<sup>42</sup>

The services are attempting to respond by being more nuanced in their disqualification standards—for example, by disqualifying only those with active depression as opposed to a history of depression—but this is still a worrisome trend that affects recruiting.

## Trends in Factors That Influence Propensity Suggest Future Challenges

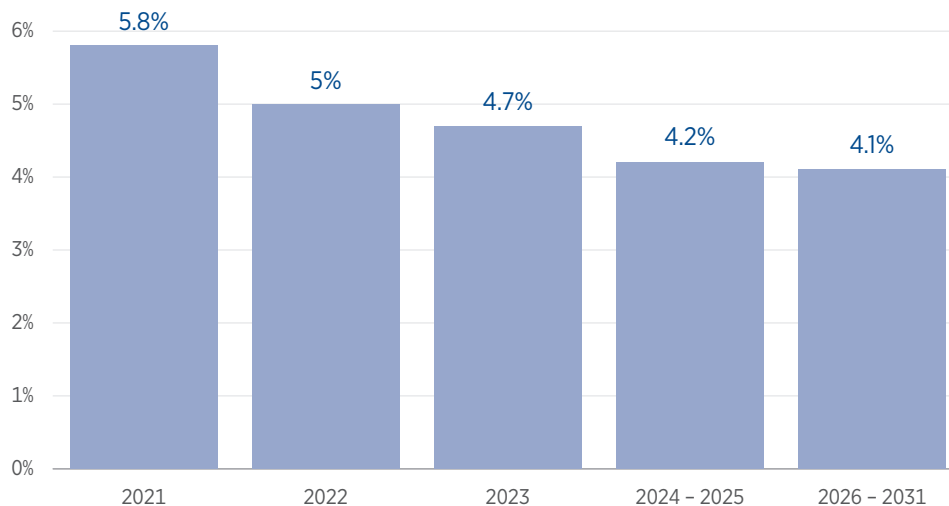
Propensity is the percentage of youth that express a desire to serve in the military, and it has proven to be a valid predictor of enlistment behavior. It is important to understand as well that most people that enlist come from the group that is negatively disposed toward enlistment, so the military cannot ignore this group.<sup>43</sup>

Noted military sociologist Dr. Charles Moskos has defined two motivations that lead individuals to join the military: institutional and occupational.<sup>44</sup> Individuals who join for institutional reasons are motivated by duty, honor, and patriotism; those with an occupational orientation are more persuaded by pay, benefits, and job security. Certainly, a mixture of both motivations is likely.<sup>45</sup> Among American youth, propensity to serve in the military is already low: in aggregate, just 13 percent. If current trends that influence propensity continue, it is likely to be lower by 2030.<sup>46</sup>

A declining unemployment rate and a long-term trend among high school seniors to attend college directly after graduation will negatively influence occupational propensity, as might the potential for the current Administration to reduce the value of the military education benefit by providing free college tuition. Factors that could well negatively influence institutional propensity include the declining percentage of veterans in society, certain alarming trends in civic education, and the declining level of public trust in the military.

CHART 3

### Projected Average Annual Unemployment Rate



**SOURCE:** Table 1, “CBO’s Economic Projections for Calendar Years 2021 to 2031,” in Congressional Budget Office, “An Overview of the Economic Outlook: 2021 to 2031,” February 2021, p. 2, <https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/2021-02/56965-Economic-Outlook.pdf> (accessed August 31, 2021).

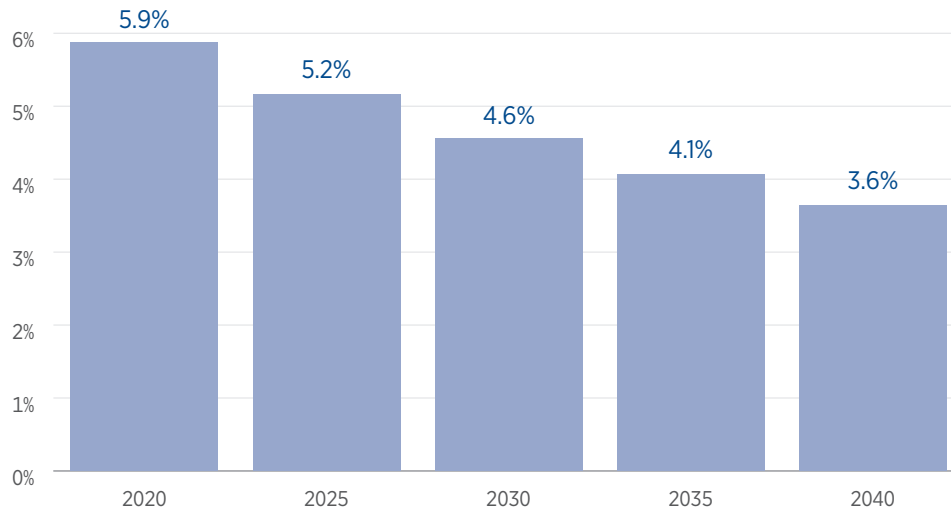
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**Economic Outlook.** The Congressional Budget Office projects that the U.S. economy will continue to improve following the COVID-19 pandemic. The CBO predicts unemployment rates of 5.0 percent in 2022, 4.7 percent in 2023, and 4.1 percent in the years 2026–2031, down from approximately 5.8 percent in June 2021.<sup>47</sup> Economists would correctly counter by saying that predicting the unemployment rate is difficult and unreliable, but absent some unexpected events, it is safe to assume that low unemployment will likely return, challenging recruiting efforts. Further, as the overall population ages, unemployment should decline further as there are fewer (as a percentage) younger workers to take the place of those who are retiring.

Autonomy, new technology, and workplace culture might change the types of available jobs, but they will likely not result in fewer employment opportunities for Americans. Studies conducted for the Army have found that there is a direct relationship between the unemployment rate and recruiting success. Researchers believe that “for every percent increase in the overall unemployment rate, there is a significant increase” in the propensity to serve and that this “translates to approximately one half a

CHART 4

### Projected Veterans as Percentage of U.S. Population



**SOURCES:** Table 2, “Projected Age Groups and Sex Composition of the Population: Projections for the United States: 2017–2060,” revised release date September 2018, in U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau, “2017 National Population Projections Tables: Main Series,” <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/popproj/tables/2017/2017-summary-tables/np2017-t2.xlsx> (accessed August 31, 2021), and Table 1L, “VetPop2018 Living Veterans by Age Group, Gender, 2018–2048,” in U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, “Population Tables: Age/Gender,” last updated April 14, 2021, [https://www.va.gov/vetdata/Veteran\\_Population.asp](https://www.va.gov/vetdata/Veteran_Population.asp) (accessed August 31, 2021).

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percentage increase in a youth’s probability to expect to serve for every one percent increase in unemployment.”<sup>48</sup>

In sum, it can be assumed that a healthy economy and a stable, low unemployment rate lasting through the next decade will challenge military recruiting efforts.

**Exposure to Veterans.** According to a RAND study, “[t]he majority (63 percent) of new recruits in the 2016 New Recruit Survey reported having an immediate family member who is serving or has served, with 27 percent stating they had a parent who has served.”<sup>49</sup> A high percentage of servicemembers continue to come from military families. However, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs projects a steady decrease in the veteran population over the next 30 years.<sup>50</sup> Over the next decade alone, the veteran population is expected to decrease at an average rate of 1.7 percent per year, with a total decline of 17 percent by 2030.<sup>51</sup>

Fewer veterans in the American population will result in fewer young Americans influenced to serve. Fewer veterans mean fewer veteran families to expose their friends and relatives to the culture of the military and the demands of service, as well as its practical benefits such as health care, job security, and student debt relief.<sup>52</sup> With fewer veterans present in American communities, a shrinking proportion of the coming generations of those who will qualify for service will be inclined to enlist.

**Civic Education.** The National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service found that “[w]idespread and effective civic education is an essential requirement for fostering a culture of service.”<sup>53</sup> In her statement to the commission, American Enterprise Institute scholar Dr. Rebecca Burgess made the link between military service and civic education explicit:

American soldiers exist primarily to protect the American people and American democratic principles against external threats. Yet a nation cannot attract or support such soldiers or public servants in the most fundamental way needed, when it no longer much knows what it itself is...

Civic education reminds the citizen that her rights are accompanied by civic duties or obligations—something our current emphasis on the importance of asserting rights has been a bit blind to.<sup>54</sup>

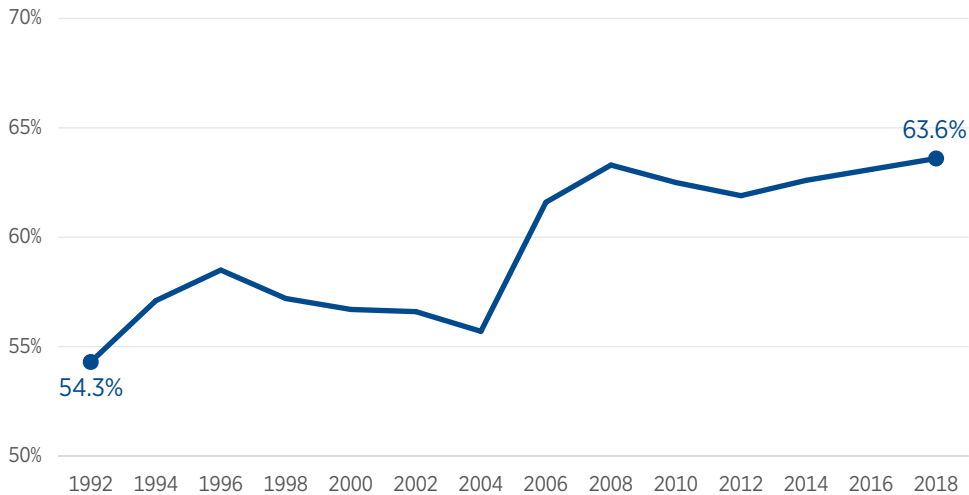
U.S. civic education is in decline; 22 percent of adults cannot name *any* of the three branches of government, and 37 percent cannot name the rights contained in the First Amendment to the Constitution.<sup>55</sup> Further, it was reported in 2018 that only 23 percent of eighth graders “performed at or above the proficient level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress civics exam.”<sup>56</sup> Reflecting the decline over time, there is a sharp generational difference in civics knowledge: 74 percent of native-born senior citizens can pass the U.S. citizenship test, but only 20 percent of those under the age of 45 can pass it.<sup>57</sup>

## Other Factors

**Increasing Percentage of High School Seniors Who Go Directly to College.** The percentage of high school seniors who go directly to college and are not available to join the military immediately (although those who graduate or drop out are) has been rising steadily since 1992. In 1992, 54.3 percent went directly from high school to college; by 2018, 63.6 percent of seniors were going directly to college after high school, further shrinking the size of the recruitable population.

CHART 5

## Rate of High School Graduates Going to College



**SOURCE:** National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, “College Participation Rates: College-Going Rates of High School Graduates—Directly from High School,” <http://www.higheredinfo.org/dbrowser/index.php?measure=32> (accessed August 31, 2021).

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**Declining Value of Military Education Benefits.** Education benefits have been linked to the military’s ability to attract high-quality enlistments. The ability to pay for future education is tied with pay as the top reason individuals recently gave for joining the military.

When they were enacted, the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill (PGIB)<sup>58</sup> and its predecessor, the Montgomery G.I. Bill,<sup>59</sup> provided relatively generous education benefits for individuals entering military service. The commercial marketplace has since altered that landscape. Most U.S. employers now provide educational benefits, with 63 percent reporting that they offer tuition assistance and reimbursement.<sup>60</sup> Starbucks now provides 100 percent tuition coverage for its employees at Arizona State University,<sup>61</sup> and Chick-fil-A provides up to \$10,000 for college for its employees.<sup>62</sup>

Recent Biden Administration proposals to make community college or public college tuition-free for students coming from households earning less than \$125,000 would also significantly diminish the relative value of the PGIB education benefit.<sup>63</sup> Tuition loan forgiveness might act in the same manner. Given the increasing frequency with which education benefits are now offered in the commercial marketplace, combined with the potential

of government tuition support, it is reasonable to expect that the value of this military recruiting incentive will be diminished.

**Declining Public Trust in the Military.** While the military has consistently been at the top of institutions that Americans most trust, that confidence is slipping. In 2011, 78 percent of Americans expressed a “great deal or quite a lot” of confidence in the military. Ten years later in 2021, 69 percent of Americans expressed such a level of confidence.<sup>64</sup> While these are anecdotal factors, sexual assault and harassment issues, problems with privatized military housing, and the popular media portrayal of troops returning home with mental and physical issues could be contributing to this loss of confidence and causing fewer individuals to volunteer for military service.

All of the trends discussed thus far in this paper—demographics, the economy, youth health, veteran population, the percentage high school seniors going directly to college, civic education, the declining value of military education benefits, and slipping public trust—point toward a more challenging future recruiting environment. The Army’s failure to meet its recruiting goals in 2018 was probably the proverbial “canary in the coal mine,” warning us of a future in which the military will constantly struggle to recruit the necessary numbers.

Without positive action to reverse these trends, recruiting and, by association, the U.S. military will suffer.

## Preparing for a More Challenging Future

The U.S. military is already struggling to recruit enough high-quality people to meet its requirements, and trends indicate that this situation will get worse—perhaps much worse. Fortunately, there are solutions, *but they can help only if Congress and the Administration act.* Step one is to recognize that there is a problem. Most military leaders appear to be oblivious to this issue, preferring instead to speak about the need for new strategies or equipment. But without people to man its ranks, even the best strategy or the most technologically marvelous equipment will fail.

Thus far, the Pentagon has chosen to treat this issue by furiously manipulating levers such as bonuses and recruiter levels to achieve annual recruiting goals (and in some cases actually lowering those goals). Such short-term remedies are insufficient. This situation requires a longer-term perspective that encompasses legislative changes, national priorities, and a whole-of-government approach.

Three things can and should be done to increase the number of eligible and motivated youth.

1. **Provide better support and tools for recruiters to help obese and unfit youth meet fitness standards.** Obesity is what some refer to as a “wicked” problem requiring action by individuals, families, doctors, and local, state, and federal governments. But the military can do more to meet American youth where they are today and achieve necessary fitness standards. Recruiters initially evaluate potential recruit body mass using weight scales and tape measures and advise individuals when they fail to meet the standard.

The services offer limited help for candidates who do not qualify. The Army, for example, makes written and online materials on physical fitness available to candidates through its March2Success program.<sup>65</sup> Some recruiters, perhaps motivated by necessity or empathy to do more, conduct informal exercise and diet classes before and after office hours to help motivated individuals lose weight. At an Army recruiting office in Waldorf, Maryland, about 15 recruits gathered recently for informal 90-minute exercise sessions to lose weight. Recruiters use their personal time to conduct these sessions, which are not part of any official program and are unresourced.<sup>66</sup>

If the military hopes to enlarge the pool of eligible recruits, it needs to engage with American youth earlier and in a more comprehensive manner. Congress should provide funding for the military to conduct more formal, resourced programs to encourage prospective candidates to lose weight and become fit. Instructors could be given formal training and could even employ technology such as fitness trackers and exercise software. Stronger partnerships could be established between recruiters and high school physical education teachers and programs.

2. **Better understand the factors that disqualify youth from military service.** The last time the DOD studied disqualifying factors was over five years ago in 2016.<sup>67</sup> That study, “The Target Population for Military Recruitment: Youth Eligible to Enlist Without a Waiver,”<sup>68</sup> only described the disqualifying factors. It did not provide recommended solutions. The DOD should update this work and consider how to mitigate the disqualifying factors.



One major source of disqualification currently involves the use of marijuana. Although recreational marijuana is now legal in 19 states, Washington, DC, and Guam, a military volunteer who admits to marijuana use very likely they will be able to enlist only if a waiver is granted.<sup>69</sup> No matter how one feels about the legalization of marijuana, it should not fall to recruiters to reconcile conflicting state and federal laws on this drug and its use.

A similar case could be made with respect to the military tattoo policy, which differs for each service. In the Army, tattoos are prohibited from the wrist down and on the neck, while the Navy prohibits only tattoos on the head or scalp.<sup>70</sup> Tattoos disqualify thousands of individuals each year. Service policies need to be reconciled.

3. **Use national role models to promote military service and youth health and fitness.** There is a dearth of public educational programs to educate youth on the benefits of proper weight and fitness. President Joseph Biden’s Council on Sports, Fitness & Nutrition, whose mission includes “educating Americans about the benefits of physical activity and healthy eating,” has been absent from the national stage and has not met since September 17, 2020.<sup>71</sup> Its efforts should be energized.

Moreover, who can recall a national figure recently talking about the benefits of military service or health and fitness? The Department of Defense should routinely contract with nationally recognized spokespeople to promote military service and fitness. Athletes who come from service academies and play professional sports or compete in the Olympics are naturals for this type of service. Further, it should be a matter of policy that public and nonprofit schools be required to allow someone from the DOD to formally “ask” high school juniors to serve their country.

Eight additional actions can be taken to increase the effectiveness of military recruiting.

1. **Encourage earlier engagement between youth and military recruiters.** Federal law requires public and nonprofit schools to release information on students aged 17 and older to military recruiters or risk losing federal funding.<sup>72</sup> Many students have already begun

before age 17 to consider post-high school options. Moreover, high school juniors are between 16–17 years of age, and students in that year of school usually visit college campuses. Congress should consider changing the law to allow recruiter engagement at age 16.

- 2. Reimagine and increase the number of Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) programs.** Although there are more than 3,000 JROTC programs in U.S. high schools, these programs are not being leveraged effectively to support the military recruiting effort. JROTC is a voluntary high school program administered by the DOD. In FY 2020, there were 3,432 JROTC sites, and the Pentagon received over \$389 million to operate those programs.<sup>73</sup>

JROTC is authorized in federal law to “instill in students in United States secondary educational institutions the values of citizenship, service to the United States (*including an introduction to service opportunities in military, national, and public service*), and personal responsibility and a sense of accomplishment.”<sup>74</sup> The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 specifically expanded the purpose of JROTC to encompass military, national, and public service and added an authorization for the DOD to make grants to facilitate science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education for cadets.<sup>75</sup> The military departments already enjoy broad authority to support JROTC programs, including by assigning active-duty military personnel as instructors, and can issue students necessary text materials, uniforms, and equipment.

While 3,432 represents a lot of JROTC programs, there are more than 30,000 secondary or combined public secondary/elementary schools in the United States, so only about 11 percent of U.S. high schools have JROTC programs.<sup>76</sup> The National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service made a recommendation to increase the number of these programs to 6,000 by 2031.<sup>77</sup> Because private schools are currently not eligible for JROTC programs, those schools might also represent a missed opportunity.

JROTC programs have traditionally stopped short of actively promoting service in the military, preferring instead to describe the program as promoting “good citizenship.”<sup>78</sup> Perhaps that approach is less threatening to high schools and parents. However, with the change in

the 2021 law, which specifically expanded the purpose of JROTC to give participants an introduction to military service, programs can and should take a more proactive approach.

The military services themselves often take an ambivalent view of the JROTC program, believing that it does not directly contribute to their recruiting missions.<sup>79</sup> However, given the potential to expose hundreds of thousands of American youths to the military, the Pentagon should be encouraged both to embrace and to reimagine the JROTC program. The number of programs should be increased, and an independent assessment should be performed to determine how best to take advantage of this access to American youth.

The DOD should request funding to bring in cutting-edge STEM instruction as now authorized by law. This would have the impact of broadening the program's appeal beyond the traditional population of "at-risk" students that often form the bulk of JROTC student populations. Additionally, JROTC faculty should be assessed periodically to ensure that they continue to present the most relevant and appealing image of the U.S. military. As an example, the name "Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps" does not adequately describe the benefits and opportunities the program offers. Additionally, the uniforms that JROTC cadets wear, which mimic those worn by the military, often look ridiculous on high school students and therefore can undermine efforts to convince youth to join.

- 3. Better unify service recruiting efforts.** Although most recruiters are co-located, there remains redundancy between the recruiting efforts of the Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force, Space Force, and National Guard. As a RAND study has pointed out, "recruiters are managed by independent recruiting structures that have little if any incentive to share market information." Most high schools have multiple recruiters from independent services attempting to recruit the same population and working at cross purposes.<sup>80</sup> In 2016, the U.S. Government Accountability (formerly General Accounting) Office found "examples of possible unnecessary duplication, overlap, and fragmentation that may result from the absence of coordination" and concluded that "DOD does not have comprehensive oversight of the components' advertising activities."<sup>81</sup>

The military services claim that individual service recruiting efforts are needed in order to communicate each service's unique culture, attributes, and advantages properly, but such arguments may not be compelling compared to the potential efficiency that could be gained if each high school in America did not have to be covered by five different service recruiting organizations. Some amount of unification of service recruiting should be examined, especially in lead development and identification. In that model, follow-on discussions could still be conducted by individual service representatives.

Another concept worthy of exploration is joint recruiting brigades and battalions that oversee service-unique recruiting companies, potentially getting the value of joint recruiting while maintaining service-unique culture. Greater unification between the active duty and National Guard elements of the services should also be examined. All these efforts might allow the military services to cover the existing population more comprehensively.

4. **Prioritize talent in military recruiting organizations.** In much of the military, service in recruiting is perceived as something to be avoided. Senior leaders—colonels, Navy captains, and higher ranks—are often assigned to lead military recruiting organizations without ever having served a day in recruiting. In the Army, for example, the last five commanding generals of Army Recruiting Command never served in recruiting before being made the leader of the organization.<sup>82</sup> A business could never treat personnel recruiting in such a cavalier manner and hope to survive.

If the military services want to continue to achieve their personnel goals, they must deliberately identify, train, and assign leaders who are specifically prepared to recruit tomorrow's force. The Marine Corps, unlike the other services, employs a recruiting model that depends on choosing the best Marines in field units to become recruiters. Additionally, the Corps' two-star recruiting commander reports directly to the Commandant, as opposed to the practice in the other services, which have intermediate three-star commands.<sup>83</sup> Each service must strive to assign officers that show aptitude for senior rank to their recruiting organizations.

- 5. Better employ modern business practices for military recruiting.** Businesses use artificial intelligence and personal data gathered through Internet use and other means to refine their marketing and recruiting efforts. Similarly, political candidates can purchase refined lists of voters who have been determined to be potentially “winnable.” Military recruiting efforts are not nearly this advanced. A 2019 RAND study surveyed experts who reported that “attracting and recruiting candidates for the all-volunteer force would benefit from broader use of data-enabled outreach and recruiting” and “indicated that taking better advantage of third-party data and integrating it with their first-party data could enrich their marketing and recruiting operations.” Accompanying the need for better information is the need for better analytic tools. Recruiters reported that the tools available to them “did not prioritize individuals, leads, activities, or events based on their ROI [return on investment].”<sup>84</sup>

Because of burdensome laws and outdated policies, military recruiters are often forced to “cold call” candidates, using unrefined lists of high school students. The DOD should advocate for the necessary changes in law and endeavor to bring the best of commercial recruiting and marketing processes to military recruiting.

- 6. Normalize the use of the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery Career Exploration Program (ASVAB CEP).** The ASVAB CEP is a free nationwide test that helps youth understand their aptitudes and strengths. It includes a variety of potential careers, not just the military, and can come with a post-test workshop that includes test interpretation. The National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service included a recommendation in its final report that the “President and States promote ASVAB CEP administration in schools.”<sup>85</sup> Congress, working with the executive branch, should examine ways to incentivize administration of the ASVAB CEP at all public high schools.
- 7. Focus recruiting incentives on what today’s youth value.** The DOD conducts a limited “blue sky” analysis regarding what incentives carry the most value for today’s youth. Surveys ask youth to rank *existing* programs. Services routinely use bonuses to attract volunteers, but what if youth place a higher value on other factors? What part do guarantees of job location or job type play? In the commercial world,

no one joins an organization without a full understanding of where he will be assigned and what job he will perform. Each of the services is authorized to offer a form of student loan repayment program.<sup>86</sup> Given the enormous amount of student debt in society, the question should be asked: Are those programs effective, and should they be expanded?

The DOD should routinely assess what incentives carry the most value for today's youth and work with Congress to provide those incentives rather than instinctively just reaching for the checkbook. In 2012, analyst Todd Harrison, while working at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, wrote an important paper suggesting that the DOD and Congress "should use an evidence-based approach that focuses on getting better value from pay and benefits programs."<sup>87</sup> Understanding what today's young people value most highly will make recruiting incentives more powerful and compelling.

8. **Improve civic education.** Done right, civics education can equip students to become knowledgeable citizens and productive members of the community. However, in 2018, it was reported that only 23 percent of eighth graders received a proficient grade on national civics exams.<sup>88</sup> States and local school districts must do more to promote civics education.

## What Congress, the Department of Defense, and the States Should Do

To achieve these ends and maximize the effectiveness of America's military recruiting efforts, Congress should:

- **Authorize and appropriate** funds (from within existing federal government programs) for a program to enable military recruiting commands to help motivated American youth meet military fitness and obesity standards.
- **Authorize and appropriate** funding for the DOD to employ nationally recognized figures to promote the idea of military service and fitness.
- **Change** existing law to allow interaction between military recruiters and youth aged 16 and older.

- **Direct** the DOD to produce a report explaining how modern information technology, big data, and artificial intelligence can be employed more effectively to facilitate military recruiting while also protecting Americans' privacy. The DOD should be required to partner with a commercial entity with knowledge of best practices. The report should include recommendations regarding what laws must be changed to break down stovepipes and barriers to better information sharing and access.
- **Authorize and fund** an increase in the number of JROTC programs to 6,000 by 2031 and direct the DOD to commission a study on how to reimagine JROTC to take better advantage of this opportunity to access American youth.
- **Request** that an outside agency examine ways by which the DOD could unify its recruiting efforts among the military services, either completely or partially.
- **Incentivize** the administration of the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery Career Exploration Program at all public U.S. high schools.
- **Direct** the Department of Defense to assess and report routinely on the results of studies that gauge the extent to which potential recruits value incentives to enlist.

The Department of Defense should:

- **Request authority and funding** for military recruiting commands to conduct fitness and weight loss sessions for volunteers who do not meet standards and, once these sessions are authorized and funded, provide the necessary instructors, facilities, and equipment.
- **Update** the studies on the factors disqualifying American youth from serving in the military and ensure that this effort includes possible methods to mitigate these factors, apart from just waivers and reducing the standards.
- **Identify and employ** individuals who can serve as national role models and spokespersons to encourage military service.

- **Undertake** an assessment of how to increase the attractiveness of JROTC programs to American youth, increase the number of JROTC programs to 6,000 by 2031, and assess how to utilize JROTC more effectively to assist military recruiting efforts.
- **Support** the efforts of an outside agency to study methods by which individual service and National Guard recruiting efforts can be unified more effectively.
- **Better identify, prepare, train, and assign** individuals to military recruiting functions who can apply a base of experience and knowledge to an increasingly difficult problem and reward those that achieve success in recruiting appropriately, including with monetary incentives.
- **Routinely survey** American youth to determine which incentives might do the most to encourage their enlistment, modify incentive programs accordingly, and do not limit the survey only to those incentives currently authorized by law.
- **Working with Congress, better equip** military recruiting organizations with the information technology and analytic tools that will allow them to rival commercial marketing and recruiting practices.

For their part, America's states, cities, and counties should:

- **Require** a year-long course of instruction in civics that emphasizes the responsibilities of citizenship, among other topics, as a prerequisite for public high school graduation.

## Conclusion

Even today, military recruiting is difficult. Services struggle to meet their requirements and in some cases miss them altogether. As hard as it is now, however, observable trends indicate clearly that it is going to become even harder. Every single factor predictive of future recruiting success is trending negatively. Other developed countries are already experiencing recruiting crises.

The Pentagon spends a considerable amount of time and money trying to anticipate what our adversaries are doing and what types of equipment they should buy in response. A similar level of effort should be devoted to ensuring that the U.S. military has the manpower that it needs to fulfill its



mission. Congress and the executive branch can choose to do nothing and wait until this is a full-blown national security crisis, or they can begin now to prepare Americans for what promises to be an increasingly dangerous and challenging future.

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