

Addressing the Recruiting Crisis in the Armed Services

Insights from Research

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Addressing the Recruiting Crisis in the Armed Services: Insights from Research

Testimony of Beth J. Asch¹
The RAND Corporation²

Before the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation
United States House of Representatives

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Chairman Webster, Ranking Member Carbajal, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. Each year, the armed services set accession missions, which are their goals for how many training seats they want to fill with new recruits for that year. The services rarely miss their accession missions, but in fiscal year 2022, the U.S. Coast Guard missed its accession mission by over 25 percent, the fourth year in a row in which it missed its mission.³ The other services also struggled. The Army not only missed it, it did so by a historic amount: It also achieved only 75 percent of its goal.⁴ If the recruiting problem persists, it could hurt operational effectiveness. In the shorter term, the services will continue to fully fill high-priority units, like deploying units, and the shortfall will be felt for lower-priority efforts. But if the problem persists, the services will likely cut force structure and increase stress, which will hurt their overall capability. Unfortunately, three of the military services are on track for another tough year in 2023. Specifically, the Army, Air Force,

¹ The opinions and conclusions expressed in this testimony are the author's alone and should not be interpreted as representing those of the RAND Corporation or any of the sponsors of its research.

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³ Seth LaGrone, "USNI News Interview: Coast Guard Commandant Adm. Linda Fagan," USNI News, January 9, 2023.

⁴ Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, "Department of Defense Announces Recruiting and Retention Numbers for Fiscal Year 2022," press release, September 2022.

and Navy are reporting that they expect to fail to meet their accession missions by the end of this year.⁵

Today, I will summarize some of the key insights from a large body of research that has been conducted on military recruiting, with the aim of helping understand why this crisis is occurring and, more importantly, what research indicates might be done to address it. Unfortunately, little of the research has focused on the Coast Guard specifically; instead, more research has focused on its sister services, especially the Army, where recruiting problems, when they arise, usually show up first, due in large measure to its much greater recruiting requirements. That said, since the Coast Guard recruits from a similar pool of Americans and asks those who serve to make similarly difficult sacrifices, it is likely that what is known about recruiting in the other services is relevant to the Coast Guard. Many recommended actions for those services are likely to also be relevant to the Coast Guard.

The body of research covers decades, dates to even before the beginning of the all-volunteer force in 1973, and covers a wide array of topics.⁶ These include eligibility for enlistment and the role of waivers; factors affecting young people's decisions to enlist; recruiting resource management, including enlistment bonuses, recruiters, advertising, and educational benefits; and the role of competing opportunities, including those in the civilian economy, as well as those in two- and four-year college.

It is likely that each of these factors is relevant to today's recruiting challenges, though, to date, no publicly available peer-reviewed analysis of the recruiting crisis of the past couple of years has been conducted that rigorously accounts for the full array of factors that may be affecting recruiting. These factors include changes in the civilian economy; recruiting resources; military pay; the size of the eligible population, including the role of the military's new electronic health record system, known as *MHS Genesis*, which more accurately reports past medical issues and ability of applicants to medically qualify for enlistment; and changing attitudes. So, it is not yet possible to identify the leading causes of the recruiting crisis.

There are two factors that have received considerable attention that are unlikely to explain the recent difficulties.⁷ First, many military leaders and commentators have argued that the difficulties are due to the low fraction of American youth who would be eligible to enlist. Research indicates that only 23 percent of American young adults in 2020 would meet the

⁵ Jim Garamone, "Vice Chiefs Talk Recruiting Shortfalls, Readiness Issues," DOD News, April 20, 2023.

⁶ For a summary of recent studies, see Beth J. Asch, *Navigating Current and Emerging Army Recruiting Challenges: What Can Research Tell Us?* RAND Corporation, RR-3107-A, 2019, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3107.html; Beth J. Asch and John T. Warner, "Recruiting and Retention to Sustain a Volunteer Military Force," in David J. Galbreath and John R. Deni, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Defence Studies*, Routledge, 2018; and Curtis Gilroy, Elizabeth Clelan, Josh Horvath, and Christopher Gonzales, *The All-Volunteer Force and the Need for Sustained Investment in Recruiting*, CNA, April 2020.

⁷ See, for example, U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, "Full Committee Hearing to Receive Testimony on the Recruiting Challenges Facing the United States Military," video of testimony by military leaders, March 22, 2023, <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/hearings/to-receive-testimony-on-the-recruiting-challenges-facing-the-united-states-military>.

enlistment standards of the military services without a waiver.⁸ But the fraction of the population that would be eligible has been low for decades. For example, the eligibility rate was estimated to be about 30 percent according to a 2006 study.⁹ Thus, while eligibility has declined, which is concerning, the low rate of eligibility is an unlikely explanation for the recent difficulties.

A second factor that leaders have identified as the cause of the recruiting crisis is the low propensity of American youth to enlist. Since 2001, the Joint Advertising, Market Research and Studies group within the Department of Defense (DoD) has conducted a roughly quarterly survey of American young people ages 16 to 21 that asks them, “How likely is it that you will be serving in the military in the next few years?” If they report “definitely” or “probably,” they are categorized as being *positively propensed*, meaning they want to join the military. In spring 2022, only 10 percent of American youth indicated that they were positively propensed to serve.¹⁰ But there are two problems with the argument that low propensity is the reason for the recent recruiting crisis. First, enlistment propensity has been low for decades. The percentage of youth who are positively propensed increases and decreases over time but has been at most 15 percent since 2004, and the services have enjoyed some strong recruiting years since then.¹¹

Second, available research indicates that most recruits come from the negatively propensed group, not the positively propensed group. When the DoD survey data on propensity are linked with DoD’s administrative records of enlistments, the data reveal that positively propensed people are more likely to enlist.¹² But since most people—90 percent in 2022—are in the negatively propensed group, these results imply that most enlistments would come from the negative group. This finding helps explain why recruiting is so challenging: A large part of the military recruiting effort involves converting youth who are negatively propensed to join the military into actual enlistments. Not surprisingly, then, recruiting is also costly. For example,

⁸ Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, “2020 Qualified Military Available (QMA) Study,” briefing slide, 2020, https://prod-media.asvabprogram.com/CEP_PDF_Contents/Qualified_Military_Available.pdf.

⁹ Barbara Bicksler and Lisa Nolan, “Recruiting an All-Volunteer Force: The Need for Sustained Investment in Recruiting Resources,” Strategic Analysis, Policy Perspectives, Vol. 1, No. 1, September 2006.

¹⁰ The DoD survey is known as the *DoD Youth Poll*. Prior to 2001, DoD measured propensity using an alternative survey, known as the *Youth Attitude Tracking Study*. Consequently, DoD has propensity data dating back to the 1970s. The percentage of young people expressing a positive propensity varies across the services and over time within a service but has been mostly around 10 percent in aggregate in recent years. The trend in propensity since 2001 can be found in Office of People Analytics, “Spring 2022 Propensity Update,” presentation slides, U.S. Department of Defense, February 23, 2023.

¹¹ For example, the Army exceeded its total accession mission by 4 percent in 2012 and recruited 100 percent high school diploma graduates and 64 percent with above-average scores on the Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT), yet propensity hovered around 13 to 14 percent in 2012 (Lawrence Kapp, “Recruiting and Retention: An Overview of FY2011 and FY2012 Results for Active and Reserve Component Enlisted Personnel,” Congressional Research Service, 7-5700, RL32965, May 2013; Office of People Analytics, “Spring 2022 Propensity Update,” presentation slides, U.S. Department of Defense, February 23, 2023).

¹² Analysis of youth attitude tracking survey data shows that 33 percent of those said they “definitely will” enlist actually enlisted while 17 percent of those who said they “probably will” enlist actually enlisted. In contrast, only 5 percent of those with negative propensity actually enlisted (Bruce Orvis, Martin Gahart, and Alvin Ludwig, *Validity and Usefulness of Enlistment Intention Information*, RAND Corporation, R-3775-FMP, 1992).

Army recruiting costs were \$1.5 billion annually on average between 2001 and 2014 in 2016 dollars.¹³

Strategies for Addressing the Crisis in the Short Term

While rigorous analysis of the drivers of the crisis has yet to be done, past research can provide insight into what the armed services might do about the crisis in the short and long terms. In the short term, the services should focus on policies that research shows are effective.

First, the services should meet end strength mandated by Congress by increasing retention. Fortunately, notwithstanding pockets of retention problems in some skill areas, such as pilots, retention in each service, including the Coast Guard,¹⁴ has been strong. Even the Army, which missed its recruiting mission in 2018 and 2022, exceeded its retention goals from 2017 to 2022 and continues to do so, and it has set high retention goals for 2023. The Coast Guard should also set aggressive retention goals to meet end strength given its recruiting problems.

Second, the services should offer more people enlistment bonuses and increase the dollar amounts of those bonuses. Research shows that enlistment bonuses expand the supply of recruits overall and have an especially large effect when targeted to recruits who choose to train in critical specialties.¹⁵ An important advantage of enlistment bonuses, over and above their enlistment expansion effects, is that they can be deployed quickly when recruiting shortfalls arise, because the services have authority to reprogram or realign funds in their personnel budgets to make more bonus payments than originally funded without getting prior congressional approval. However, increasing enlistment bonuses is not a good long-term strategy when used alone because they are costly and less effective than other resources, especially recruiters and advertising.

In the context of offering more money to enlist, it is useful to also mention what the research on recruiting has to say about military pay, since it is sometimes argued that military pay should be increased to address the recruiting crisis. Research shows that increasing military pay is the least cost-effective way to improve recruiting relative to other policies, including bonuses, recruiters, advertising, and educational benefits.¹⁶ While the research shows that the supply of

¹³ David Knapp, Bruce R. Orvis, Christopher E. Maerzluft, and Tiffany Tsai, *Resources Required to Meet the U.S. Army's Enlisted Recruiting Requirements Under Alternative Recruiting Goals, Conditions, and Eligibility Policies*, RAND Corporation, RR-2364-A, 2018, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2364.html.

¹⁴ Fagan, 2022.

¹⁵ Beth J. Asch, Paul Heaton, James Hosek, Francisco Martorell, Curtis Simon, and John T. Warner, *Cash Incentives and Military Enlistment, Attrition, and Reenlistment*, RAND Corporation, MG-950-OSD, 2010, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG950.html>; Knapp et al., 2018; J. Michael Polich, James N. Dertouzos, and S. James Press, *The Enlistment Bonus Experiment*, RAND Corporation, R-3353-FMP, 1986, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/reports/R3353.html>; Curtis J. Simon and John T. Warner, *Cash Today or College Tomorrow? Enlistment Incentives and Intertemporal Choice in the Army and Navy*, Clemson University, 2003.

¹⁶ Asch et al., 2010; Simon and Warner, 2003; Curtis J. Simon and John T. Warner, "Managing the All-Volunteer Force in a Time of War," *Economics of Peace and Security Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2007; John T. Warner, Curtis J. Simon, and Deborah M. Payne, *Enlistment Supply in the 1990's: A Study of the Navy College Fund and Other Enlistment Incentive Programs*, Defense Manpower Data Center, DMDC Report No. 2000-015, April 2001.

high-quality enlistments to the armed services increases with increases in military pay relative to civilian pay, such increases are an expensive policy. To prevent pay compression, Congress would need to increase pay not just for the most-junior enlisted personnel but for all personnel across the force. In addition, unlike bonuses, those pay raises would be permanent and factor into future pay raises. Furthermore, they would factor into other benefits, such as retired pay. Increasing pay as a means of solving recruiting problems only begins to make sense when the services are also experiencing widespread retention problems, as was the case in the late 1990s.¹⁷ Today, there is no evidence of widespread retention problems.

Studies also find that military advertising is effective in expanding the supply of high-quality enlistments.¹⁸ Research shows that the effectiveness varies with media type and the scale of advertising and that advertising is more cost-effective than bonuses and pay increases in generating enlistments. A disadvantage of advertising as a short-term recruiting policy is that it takes time to get the authority to launch an advertising campaign and then to develop and deploy an effective campaign, especially in a fragmented market where different messages may resonate with different populations.

Another important short-term strategy supported by research is expanding the size of the recruiter force. Studies consistently find that high-quality enlistments increase with the number of production recruiters, other factors held constant.¹⁹ The research also points to the importance of recruiter management. That is, the positive relationship between recruiters and enlistments is not automatic. Recruiters compose a workforce, and they are a human resource that must be properly managed to be effective and efficient.

An important aspect of recruiter management is an incentive system that provides recruiters with incentives to be productive. Research shows that these incentive systems affect recruiter productivity in terms of the quality, number, and timing of enlistments.²⁰ Recruiters are incentivized to increase effort when these plans are designed properly, but the plans can have perverse unintended effects if not designed well. For example, one study found that Army recruit

¹⁷ Beth J. Asch, *Setting Military Compensation to Support Recruitment, Retention, and Performance*, RAND Corporation, RR-3197-A, 2019, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3197.html; James Hosek, Beth J. Asch, and Michael G. Mattock, *Should the Increase in Military Pay Be Slowed?* RAND Corporation, TR-1185-OSD, 2012, https://www.rand.org/pubs/technical_reports/TR1185.html.

¹⁸ James N. Dertouzos and Steven Garber, *Is Military Advertising Effective? An Estimation Methodology and Applications to Recruiting in the 1980s and 90s*, RAND Corporation, MR-1591-OSD, 2003, https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1591.html; Knapp et al., 2018.

¹⁹ Asch et al., 2010; Knapp et al., 2018; Simon and Warner, 2003; Simon and Warner, 2007; Warner, Simon, and Payne, 2001.

²⁰ Jeremy Arkes and Jesse M. Cunha, "Workplace Goals and Output Quality: Evidence from Time-Constrained Recruiting Goals in the US Navy," *Defence and Peace Economics*, Vol. 26, No. 5, 2015; Beth J. Asch, "Do Incentives Matter? The Case of Navy Recruiters," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, Vol. 43, No. 3, February 1990; Beth J. Asch and Paul Heaton, *An Analysis of the Incidence of Recruiter Irregularities*, RAND Corporation, TR-827-OSD, 2010, https://www.rand.org/pubs/technical_reports/TR827.html; Beth J. Asch and Lynn A. Karoly, *The Role of the Job Counselor in the Military Enlistment Process*, RAND Corporation, MR-315-P&R, 1993, https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR315.html.

screening was poorer at the end of the recruiting month, when recruiters are incentivized to meet their monthly recruiting missions.²¹

The powerful effect of incentive plans (independent of quotas) was documented in an older study of Army guidance counselors.²² A key responsibility of guidance counselors is to channel applicants into the Army's priority occupations. During the period under study, guidance counselors were under an incentive plan that offered counselors additional points for selling a high-priority occupation. The study found that simply offering five more incentive plan points for selling a particular occupation was more than twice as effective as offering an enlistment bonus to a recruit. That is, it was more effective to give the seller (the guidance counselor) an incentive to "sell" the occupation than it was to give the buyer (the recruit) an incentive to "buy" the occupation. Furthermore, the budget outlay is dramatically lower; the cost of enlistment bonuses is substantial, while the cost of guidance counselor points is minimal. The study also found that the magnitude of the skill-channeling effect of bonuses depends crucially on the incentives of the guidance counselors.²³ Controlling for counselor effort, the estimated skill-channeling effect of bonuses was two-thirds lower.

Finally, the services have stated that they will not lower enlistment standards to solve the recruiting crisis. But a good short-term strategy would be to recruit more young people without high school diplomas. The Office of the Secretary of Defense sets a ceiling on the share of recruits that the military services can enlist without high school diplomas, equal to 10 percent.²⁴ The reason for the ceiling is that research shows that recruits without high school diplomas are more likely than those with diplomas to drop out and fail to complete their military enlistment obligations.²⁵ In the Army, RAND research found that the attrition rate for nongraduates was a third higher than for graduates, increasing from 33 percent to 44 percent.²⁶ Research from the civilian economy shows similar qualitative results: Specifically, GED holders have shorter job

²¹ Asch and Heaton, 2010.

²² Asch and Karoly, 1993.

²³ Bonuses not only increase the number of enlistments but also channel recruits into critical skill areas, since they are often offered only to recruits who agree to enter specific skill areas (Polich, Dertouzos, and Press, 1986).

²⁴ Specifically, "DoD sets two recruit quality benchmarks for the population of accessions each [fiscal year]: 90 percent with Tier 1 educational credentials (e.g., primarily high school diplomas) and 60 percent with Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT) scores at or above the 50th percentile" (Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, *Population Representation in the Military Services, Fiscal Year 2019 Summary Report*, 2021, p. 4). Consequently, DoD requires that, at most, 10 percent of recruits can be "non-Tier 1" accessions, which include high school dropouts, as well as those with General Educational Development (GED) certificates (Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, 2021).

²⁵ Beth J. Asch, Michael L. Hansen, Rosanna Smart, David Knapp, and Daniel Schwam, *An Empirical Assessment of the U.S. Army's Enlistment Waiver Policies: An Examination in Light of Emerging Societal Trends in Behavioral Health and the Legalization of Marijuana*, RAND Corporation, RR-4431-A, 2021, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4431.html; Richard J. Buddin, *Success of First-Term Soldiers: The Effects of Recruiting Practices and Recruit Characteristics*, RAND Corporation, MG-262-A, 2005, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG262.html>; Bruce R. Orvis, Christopher E. Maerzluft, Sung-Bou Kim, Michael G. Shanley, and Heather Krull, *Prospective Outcome Assessment for Alternative Recruit Selection Policies*, RAND Corporation, RR-2267-A, 2018, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2267.html.

²⁶ Orvis et al., 2018.

tenures than high school graduates do. They also have lower wages and are comparable to high school dropouts in terms of their labor market outcomes.²⁷

Despite their higher predicted attrition rate, increasing the share of accessions without high school diplomas is a sensible short-term strategy given the recent crisis. This is because the services have historically been below the 10-percent cap. For example, the Army has been below the ceiling since 2010. In 2022, the Army was at 6 percent, even despite missing its recruiting mission in 2022. The Coast Guard in 2018, the year for which data are available, recruited less than 2 percent nongraduates, far below the 10-percent cap.²⁸ Therefore, increasing this percentage to 10 percent would still be within the DoD standard. But more importantly, RAND research shows that across all recruits who enter in a year, an increase from 5 to 10 percent in the Army is predicted to have only a slight effect on the overall attrition rate of that entering cohort that translates to about a one-half–percentage point increase in the overall attrition rate.²⁹ While the services should always prioritize the enlistment of higher-quality recruits—those with at least a high school diploma and who score in the top half of the test score distribution of the AFQT—since they perform better and are less likely to drop from service, a modest increase in the enlistment of GED holders within the 10-percent cap could lower the risk of failing to meet accession missions in the current crisis, with minimal implications for readiness.

Strategies for Addressing the Crisis in the Long Term

The short-term strategies are aimed at getting through the coming year. For the long term, the armed services should focus on gaining a better understanding of relevant factors that are changing and identifying how to respond.

Research shows that improvements in the civilian economy, as measured by declines in the civilian unemployment rate, hurt recruiting success among high-quality applicants, all else equal, and, of course, the U.S. economy is currently strong, as measured by the civilian unemployment rate.³⁰ The armed services understand that good civilian opportunities adversely affect the supply of high-quality enlistments and help explain why recruiting is so difficult right now. But what are less understood by the armed services are some major shifts occurring in the U.S. labor market, especially for young men, who traditionally account for most enlistments (though the share of female recruits has been increasing).³¹

Perhaps the biggest shift relevant to the armed services is the decline since 2000 in the share of young men who are employed or looking for work—what economists call the *labor force*

²⁷ Stephen V. Cameron and James J. Heckman, “The Nonequivalence of High School Equivalents,” *Journal of Labor Economics*, Vol. 11, No. 1, Part 1: Essays in Honor of Jacob Mincer, January 1993.

²⁸ Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, 2021, Appendix E.

²⁹ Orvis et al., 2018.

³⁰ Asch et al., 2010; Knapp et al., 2018; Simon and Warner, 2003; Simon and Warner, 2007; Warner, Simon, and Payne, 2001.

³¹ Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, “Population Representation in the Military Services,” webpage with links to reports from 1997 to 2017, undated, <https://prhome.defense.gov/M-RA/Inside-M-RA/MPP/Accession-Policy/Pop-Rep/>.

participation rate. Labor economists have devoted considerable effort to understanding why fewer people are working or looking for work, as well as to understanding what young men are doing with their time instead and how they might be supporting themselves. Research on these questions is still underway, but available research provides some insights.³²

Among the effects that research can quantify based on existing evidence, the research suggests that the factors driving the drop in the labor force participation rate are varied. They include factors that have reduced the demand for workers, such as import competition from China that has reduced manufacturing jobs, technological improvements that substitute industrial robots for workers, and rising minimum wage policies. They also include factors that have reduced the supply of workers, such as increased opioid prescriptions, increased receipt of disability benefits, and increased rates of incarceration. Research indicates that, in terms of how they spend their time and how they support themselves, younger men, ages 21 to 30, exhibited a sharp increase between 2000 and 2017 in the time devoted to gaming and leisure recreational computing,³³ while the Census Bureau reports that the share of men ages 25 to 34 living at home rose 45 percent between 2000 and 2022.³⁴ An important question that requires further investigation and is being considered by the upcoming 14th Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation is what these labor market shifts mean for recruiting for the armed services and the setting of military compensation.

Another notable recent trend is the decline in the share of Americans reporting a high level of trust in the U.S. military, documented in several recent surveys.³⁵ The decline is part of a larger trend of a decline in trust among Americans in institutions in general—and, from the military’s perspective, part of an ongoing concern about a divide between the military and the civilian population in terms of culture, experiences, and values. The causes of this decline in trust have been a subject of considerable commentary among senior leaders, think tanks, and news outlets who have attributed the decline to such factors as the risks associated with service, specifically

³² Recent research documenting the decline and summarizing the academic literature on the causes can be found in Katharine G. Abraham and Melissa S. Kearney, “Explaining the Decline in the US Employment-to-Population Ratio: A Review of the Evidence,” *Journal of Economic Literature*, Vol. 58, No. 3, September 2020; Ariel J. Binder and John Bound, “The Declining Labor Market Prospects of Less-Educated Men,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol. 33, No. 2, Spring 2019; Michael Dotsey, Shigeru Fujita, and Leena Rudanko, “Where Is Everybody? The Shrinking Labor Force Participation Rate,” *Economic Insights*, Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, 2017; Alan B. Krueger, “Where Have All the Workers Gone? An Inquiry into the Decline of the U.S. Labor Force Participation Rate,” *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*, Fall 2017; and Francisco Perez-Arce and María J. Prados, “The Decline in the U.S. Labor Force Participation Rate: A Literature Review,” *Journal of Economic Surveys*, Vol. 35, No. 2, 2021.

³³ Mark Aguiar, Mark Bills, Kerwin Kofi Charles, and Erik Hurst, “Leisure Luxuries and the Labor Supply of Young Men,” *Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 129, No. 2, February 2021.

³⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, “Table AD-1. Young Adults, 18-34 Years Old, Living at Home: 1960 to Present,” undated, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/families/adults.html>.

³⁵ Jeffrey M. Jones, “Confidence in U.S. Institutions Down; Average at New Low,” Gallup, July 5, 2022; Brian Kennedy, Alec Tyson, and Cary Funk, “Americans’ Trust in Scientists, Other Groups Declines,” Pew Research Center, February 15, 2022; Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute, “2022 Reagan National Defense Survey,” webpage, undated, <https://www.reaganfoundation.org/reagan-institute/centers/peace-through-strength/reagan-institute-national-defense-survey/>.

sexual assault or harassment, posttraumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, suicide, and food insecurity. Other factors mentioned have been the handling of the withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan; extremist views in the military; “woke” diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives; and the handling of the COVID-19 vaccine mandate.³⁶ Like other facets of the recruiting crisis, rigorous research has not yet been conducted that provides empirical support that these or other factors explain the services’ recent recruiting challenges, holding constant other factors that have changed, such as the civilian economy.

Another area where the services need a better understanding is effective marketing in digital media. Each service has an internet presence, such as the gocoastguard.com website, to learn about the job requirements and benefits of service. But the services need to optimize their marketing strategy to make the best use of social media, such as Instagram and video games and other digital platforms where young people spend time. They need to develop effective marketing messages that not only inform but also speak to the values and life aspirations of the target audiences, and the messages must recognize the diversity of the market in terms of those values. The marketing strategy must also consider approaches other than the traditional roadside billboard and Super Bowl ad, such as military-themed shows on streaming services and the use of celebrities and sports figures as spokespeople. Finally, the services should mobilize veterans and active-duty members in an organized way to tell their stories about what service has meant to them and their families.

Another area requiring attention is the validity of current enlistment standards. DoD and the Department of Homeland Security should revalidate these standards to ensure that the analysis underlying them is current, rigorous, and peer-reviewed and that the standards are not screening out applicants who would otherwise perform successfully in the armed services. DoD is currently piloting a program to allow recruits who would otherwise require a waiver for certain medical conditions to enter without a waiver.³⁷ One standard that should be revalidated is the AFQT. An applicant’s AFQT score reflects their standing relative to the national population of Americans ages 18 to 23.³⁸ Applicants with scores below 10 and non-high school graduates with scores below 30 are ineligible to enlist, and DoD requires that the services enlist at least 60 percent of recruits with scores above 50. The AFQT was last normed using 1997 data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. It is unclear how renorming will affect eligibility to enlist, but

³⁶ David Barno and Nora Bensahel, “Addressing the U.S. Military Recruiting Crisis,” *War on the Rocks*, March 10, 2023; Steve Beynon, “Army Secretary Blames Bad Press for Making Recruiting Woes Worse,” *Military.com*, September 14, 2022; Rebecca Kheel, “Vaccine Mandate Is Hurting Recruiting, Top Marine General Says,” *Military.com*, December 4, 2022; Hope Hodge Seck, “Facing a ‘Perfect Storm’: The Military Recruiting Crisis,” *Military Officers Association of America*, December 14, 2022; Thomas Spoehr, “The Rise of Wokeness in the Military,” *Heritage Foundation*, September 30, 2022.

³⁷ Rose L. Thayer, “Pentagon Reviews Whether 38 Medical Conditions Should Remain Disqualifiers for Military Service,” *Stars and Stripes*, March 7, 2023.

³⁸ Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Force Management Policy, “Chapter 2: The Recruiting Process,” *Population Representation in the Military Services*, U.S. Department of Defense, November 2000, https://prhome.defense.gov/portals/52/Documents/POPREP/poprep99/html/chapter2/c2_recruiting.html.

test scores for 4th graders on the National Assessment of Educational Progress increased from 2000 to 2013, stagnated with some decline thereafter, and then declined during COVID-19.³⁹

Conclusion

The key recommendations and areas for consideration are for the armed services, including the Coast Guard, to adopt short-term and long-term approaches to addressing the recruiting crisis.

In the short term, the services should focus on policies that research shows are effective:

- They should meet congressional end strength requirements by increasing retention. While the services are struggling to meet recruiting goals, all of them, including the Coast Guard, are meeting their retention objectives.
- The services should offer more enlistment bonuses and increase the dollar amounts of the bonuses. Research shows that bonuses expand the market and have a particularly large effect on channeling recruits into hard-to-fill specialties. Bonuses are a rapid-response policy because the services have the flexibility to turn them on quickly, but their disadvantage is that they are costly and less effective than other recruiting resources.
- The services should also focus in the short term on increasing their advertising and the size of their recruiter force; research shows that doing so increases enlistments and that these are cost-effective policies relative to increasing bonuses and pay.
- The services should modestly increase the share of recruits without high school diplomas, staying within the DoD guidelines to enlist at most only 10 percent of such recruits. While these recruits are more likely than recruits with high school diplomas to fail to complete their enlistment contracts and to have other performance issues, increasing their share is likely to have a minor effect on the performance of the entering cohort given that their share is so small. A modest increase in non-diploma graduate recruits should not take away from the overall priority given to high-quality enlistments, since such recruits perform better and are more likely to stay in service.

In the long term, the armed services should focus on gaining a better understanding of relevant factors that are changing and identifying how to respond. This includes

- gaining a better understanding of the factors explaining the decline in the labor force participation of young people and other shifts in the labor market and what they mean for recruiting
- understanding why public trust in the military has declined and how the factors explaining that decline affect recruiting, if at all, controlling for other factors
- identifying how to optimize marketing and advertising in the age of social media, developing an effective set of messages that connect with the target markets, and considering the use of nontraditional media to implement the marketing strategy

³⁹ Michael Hansen, Elizabeth Mann Levesque, Jon Valant, and Diana Quintero, “2018 Brown Center Report on American Education: Trends in NAEP Math, Reading, and Civics Scores,” Brookings Institution, June 27, 2018; The Nation’s Report Card, “Reading and Mathematics Scores Decline During COVID-19 Pandemic,” undated, <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/highlights/ltr/2022/#more-about>.

- opening the aperture of eligibility for enlistment by validating current enlistment standards and identifying whether some standards are out of date or are screening out applicants who would otherwise be successful in the armed services.

In addition, the services should aggressively experiment with promising new ideas for improving their recruiting efforts but be equally aggressive at dropping those that fail to live up to their promise. As more data become available, rigorous analysis will be needed to identify the underlying causes of the crisis, policy effects, and where to target future recruiting efforts.

I thank the subcommittee for the opportunity to testify, and I look forward to your questions.