

ADDRESSING THE U.S. MILITARY RECRUITING CRISIS

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The all-volunteer force may finally have reached its breaking point.

During the first years of the recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, many military experts worried that the constant deployments would “break” the force since they expected that fewer young Americans would volunteer to serve in a wartime military. Thankfully, that didn’t happen. Yet a perilous recruiting crisis began just after the United States fully withdrew from Afghanistan last summer, and it shows

no sign of abating anytime soon. As a result, the U.S. military is shrinking, not because of any strategic choices, but simply because there aren't enough qualified volunteers — and that may have enormous implications for the U.S. strategic position in an increasingly uncertain and dangerous world.

How bad is the recruiting crisis? During the last fiscal year, the Army missed its recruiting goal by 15,000 active-duty soldiers, or 25 percent of its target. This shortfall forced the Army to cut its planned active-duty end strength from 476,000 to 466,000. And the current fiscal year is likely to be even worse. Army officials project that active end strength could shrink by as much as 20,000 soldiers by September, down to 445,000. That means that the nation's primary land force could plummet by as much as 7 percent in only two years — at a time when its missions are increasing in Europe and even in the Pacific, where the Army provides many of the critical wartime theater enablers without which the other services cannot function.

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The other services barely met their active-duty recruiting goals last year, but it will be harder for them to do so in 2023. They all accelerated their delayed entry applicants at the end of the last fiscal year, leaving them with a far shallower pool to draw from this year. The Marine Corps may be able to compensate for this problem because its outstanding retention rates last year enabled it to lower its recruiting goal. It may be able to do so again this year. But the Navy and the Air Force face greater recruiting headwinds. Both started with deeper holes in their pool of delayed entry applicants, offered extensive financial bonuses, and took a wide range of other one-time measures — such as the Navy increasing the maximum enlistment age from 39 to 41. Furthermore, Navy and Air Force recruiters took advantage of the release of *Top Gun: Maverick*, which, like its 1986

predecessor, was the highest-grossing film of the year. A recent analysis showed that the original *Top Gun* boosted recruiting by 8 percent. To the extent that the sequel helped boost Navy and Air Force enlistments in 2022, their recruiting holes could be even deeper in 2023. Indeed, the Air Force just announced that will likely fail to meet its recruiting goals across all three of its components.

Why is this happening now? Part of it, no doubt, is that the end of the war in Afghanistan makes military service seem less compelling. For the first time in almost 20 years, American troops are no longer fighting abroad to keep insurgents and terrorists at bay. Unemployment is low, which always makes it harder to recruit — and the tight labor market has also forced many companies to increase wages and offer compelling incentives to attract the best talent. But two other sets of factors are interacting in complex ways that make it almost impossible to determine which are having the greatest effect.

First, the number of young people who are eligible to serve in the military dropped precipitously last year — from an already low figure of 29 percent to a shocking 23 percent — largely due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Levels of depression, anxiety, and other mental health conditions exploded among young Americans (and many not-so-young Americans), who faced sometimes extreme levels of social isolation. School closures and remote instruction have caused test scores to decline dramatically throughout the country (and the world), and scores on the ASVAB, the military's standardized test for potential recruits, declined by as much as 9 percent. Shuttered schools also made it extremely difficult for recruiters to meet with young people and develop the personal relationships that are so essential for their jobs. And youth obesity rates — which have long been one of the biggest reasons for military ineligibility — increased from 19 percent to 22 percent during the pandemic. Few of these statistics will rebound quickly — and some may never recover to their pre-pandemic levels.

Though improving eligibility is extremely important, as we discuss below, it alone cannot solve the recruiting crisis. The second, and much more challenging, factor involves military propensity — the number of young people who are interested in serving in the military. Only 13 percent of young Americans said they would consider military service before the pandemic, and that already paltry figure shrank to just 9 percent last year. That number is simply not high enough to ensure the stable flow of recruits upon which the all-volunteer force relies. Two sets of survey data help explain why propensity may be declining.

First, the number of Americans expressing confidence in the U.S. military has plummeted in the past few years. To be clear, American confidence in almost all major U.S. institutions has declined, with data from Gallup showing that it reached an all-time average low of just 27 percent in 2022. Compared to that dismal statistic, the fact that 64 percent of survey respondents expressed confidence in the military last year is a strong endorsement indeed. Yet that figure was 72 percent in 2020 and 69 percent in 2021 — marking an 8 percentage point drop in only two years. More disturbingly, the Reagan National Defense Survey found even steeper declines, with confidence in the U.S. military dropping from 70 percent in 2018 to just 45 percent in 2021 (before rebounding slightly to 48 percent in 2022).

Second, there are some early indications that fewer people in and around the military are willing to recommend military service to young people. In 2019, almost 75 percent of military families said they would recommend military service to someone they care about. Yet that figure dropped to just under 63 percent in 2021, another sharp decline in just two years. Since 80 percent of the young people who join the military today have a family member in the military — and 25-30 percent have a parent in the military — it may well be that more military families are steering their children away from uniformed service toward civilian careers.

It's difficult to assess the exact causes of these rapidly declining numbers, since as with eligibility, many different trends are converging at once. The chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan is almost certainly one of the reasons, as most

Americans disapproved of the way in which the Biden administration executed the withdrawal (including many who generally supported the decision to withdraw). Another is the increasing perception that U.S. military leaders are becoming too involved in politics, partly due to several controversies surrounding Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley. And the ever-increasing rates of sexual assault in the military became far more widely known after the tragic disappearance and death of Specialist Vanessa Guillen in 2020, and the subsequent disciplining of 14 Army officials at Fort Hood. Indeed, in a fall 2021 survey, 30 percent of Americans aged 16 to 24 said that the possibility of sexual harassment or assault was one of the main reasons why they would not consider joining the U.S. military. (The Guillen case also led Congress to pass sweeping reforms of the military justice system last year, which may eventually help alleviate such concerns.)

Furthermore, partisans on both sides of the political divide are publicly highlighting different problems facing the military, which may deter their followers (and their followers' children) from considering military service. Democrats, for example, have publicly expressed worries about the small but significant problem of extremists in the military. Many Democrats, especially Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, have also long criticized the military's seeming inability to make significant progress addressing its problems with sexual harassment and assault, and they may continue to do so if the judicial reforms mentioned above prove insufficient.

Republicans, by contrast, play down the extremist issue and instead focus on what they call the increasing "wokeness" of the military. Even though Chairman Milley, leaders from all services, and outside experts have strongly rejected such claims, some Republican members of Congress continue to push this narrative, even accusing the military of using "cherry-picked data" in ways that obscure these problems. In November, for example, the offices of Senator Marco Rubio and Representative Chip Roy published a report called Woke Warfighters, which

accuses the Biden administration of weakening military strength by promoting critical race theory, supporting sex-reassignment procedures, and promoting LGBTQ+ individuality. In a recent survey, almost half of Republicans agreed with the statement that “woke practices undermining military effectiveness” was one of the reasons for their decreased confidence in the U.S. military. And now that Republicans have regained control of the House of Representatives, they are planning to push back hard on these issues by focusing on what Representative Jim Jordan called “getting rid of all of the ‘woke’ in our military.”

Addressing these complicated and multifold challenges will not be simple or swift. There are no magic solutions that will suddenly make more young people eligible to serve, or easily reverse the increasingly skeptical youth attitudes toward the military. Increasing the propensity to serve will require long-term efforts that bridge the ever-widening gap between the American people and their military. And though all of the services are taking a variety of measures to address these problems, more remains to be done to ensure not just the readiness of the military but also the sustained viability of an all-volunteer force.

Here are several actions the military services — and the nation as a whole — should be undertaking now to help reverse these trends.

Improving Eligibility

Expand Programs like the Army’s Future Soldier Preparatory Course

One of the most successful efforts to expand recruit eligibility has been an Army program called the Future Soldier Preparatory Course. This clever initiative provides academic and fitness coaching to prospective recruits who fall short in one or both of these areas but are otherwise eligible to serve. Last year, more than 92 percent of the participants — almost 3,000 soldiers — successfully graduated into basic training, leading the Army to expand this program considerably in 2023. And preliminary evidence indicates that the graduates of this course are being

selected for leadership positions during basic training at a slightly higher rate than regular recruits, though it is too early to tell whether that will be a significant trend over time.

The clear success of this innovative approach suggests that similar programs should be adopted by the other services to help address their recruiting shortfalls. Doing so in the near term could help overcome some of the lower academic and fitness scores caused by the pandemic. Over time, they could also provide a unique opportunity to include a wider range of prospective service members who hail from vastly disparate and often uneven educational backgrounds. But these programs will also have an immediate benefit for military recruiters, who currently invest a great deal of time and energy helping potential recruits meet the fitness standards. Centralizing such efforts is not only far more efficient, but it also frees recruiters to focus on their core mission: finding and establishing relationships with more young people and encouraging them to consider military service.

Eliminate the Rule Against Permitting Recruits with Dependents

The U.S. military currently prevents any unmarried young man or woman who has a legal dependent — usually, though not always, a child — from serving on active duty. Perversely, this prohibition ends when initial entry training is complete, usually a few months later. Anyone who gains a dependent after that time may continue serving — and, according to the latest data, almost 4 percent of active-duty service members are single parents. Disqualifying single parents entirely from joining the military (or incentivizing costly legal acrobatics to qualify) makes no sense in the world in which we live today — and doesn't reflect the sensible and supportive rules for single troops with dependents already in uniform. In fact, cadets at the service academies are now allowed to continue their studies if they become parents, as long as they grant temporary guardianship to someone else. The same rule applies to all single military parents and dual-military parents, who must have an approved family care plan that identifies a temporary caregiver when

they deploy on operations or face unexpected absences. It is long past time to extend similar policies to anyone who seeks to join the military, for either the officer or enlisted ranks.



Become a War on the Rocks Member

Ryan Evans

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Allow People with Treatable Mental Health Conditions to Serve

Mental health issues among young people have been increasing for a long time, and that trend escalated greatly during the pandemic. However, many people who suffer from depression, anxiety, and other disorders can be effectively treated with commonly prescribed medications. According to the American Psychiatric Association, for example, 55–65 percent of diagnosed children and adolescents respond well to initial treatment with antidepressant medication. The U.S. military has long allowed those in uniform to continue serving while taking such medications — but it inexplicably continues to bar people on those medications from joining the force. The U.S. military should not reject otherwise qualified

applicants from serving based on outdated stereotypes of mental health treatments. And, frankly, it can no longer afford to do so when such treatments are increasingly common across every segment of the U.S. population.

Instead of being automatically rejected, potential recruits should be allowed to serve if they can produce a verifiable letter from their doctor that answers the following three questions. These are slightly revised versions of the three questions — which are the only three questions — that a security clearance investigator may ask a treating physician:

- Does the applicant have a condition or treatment that could impair his or her ability to serve effectively in the U.S. military?
- If so, please describe the nature of the condition and the extent and duration of the treatment.
- What is the prognosis?

If the answer to the first question is “no,” and the prognosis is assessed as good or better, the applicant should be automatically allowed to enlist. If the answer to the first question is “yes,” but the second question identifies the issue as one which has a limited extent or duration, the applicant should be allowed to enter the system as a delayed applicant and to enter training once they have a letter where the answer to the first question is “no.”

Eliminate the Blanket Prohibition Against the Past Use of Marijuana While Continuing Drug Testing During the Recruiting Process and Beyond

Societal attitudes toward marijuana use have changed rapidly over the past decade. Today, recreational marijuana has been legalized in 21 states, Washington D.C., and Guam — which together account for more than 4.7 percent of Americans aged 15 to 24. This means that almost half of the target recruiting population lives in places where the drug is legal under state law, and many young people may not understand — or care — that it remains illegal under federal law. The U.S. military has long prided itself on being a relatively drug-free force, and it should remain so

— but it makes little sense to automatically exclude otherwise eligible recruits because they have used marijuana in the past. Indeed, research has shown that Army recruits who received waivers for low levels of marijuana use in the past performed just as well as other soldiers. It makes far more sense to disregard low levels of past use and instead focus on continuing rigorous drug-testing regimes during the recruit application process, throughout training, and regularly across the force. Maintaining a drug-free force should begin during the recruiting process, not in adolescence.

Increasing Propensity

Get the U.S. Military Out to Meet the American People

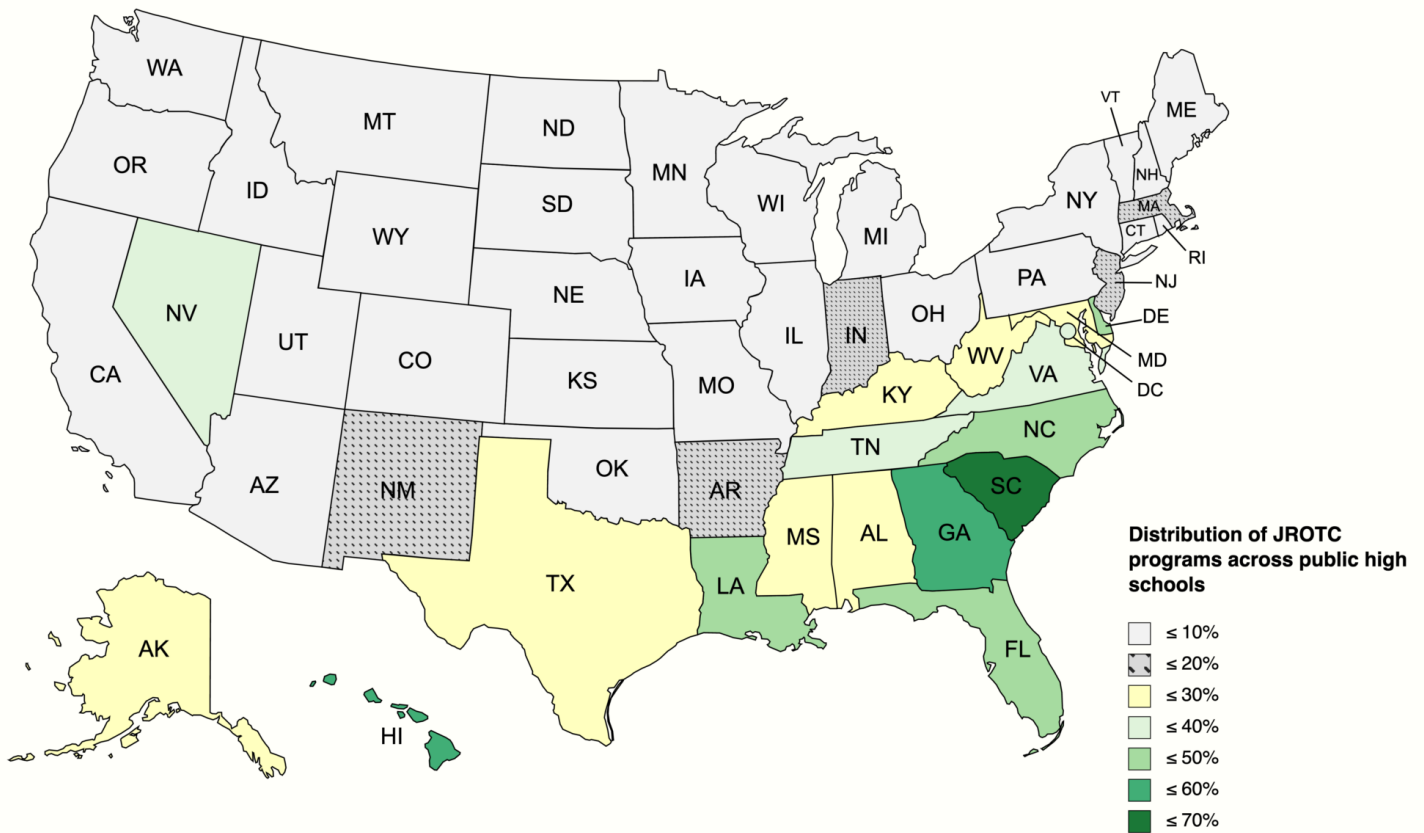
Though the all-volunteer force has been a tremendous success by almost any measure, it has one tremendous Achilles' heel: It created an ever-worsening gap between the U.S. military and the nation it serves. As noted above, the young people who are most likely to enlist in the U.S. military today are those who know it the best — those who have a relative, especially a parent, who is already serving. But that pool is far from large enough to support the long-term health of the force — and Americans all around the country deserve to see and touch the remarkable military their tax dollars pay for. Most Americans are deeply ignorant about the U.S. military, so expanding their personal connections with those in uniform is an important first step toward increasing propensity.

Doing so will require the U.S. military to actively reach out to populations in ways that it simply has not done before. The Army, for example, recently started a program that partners combat divisions with recruiting brigades in a number of large cities around the country to help more Americans meet people in uniform and see the capabilities of such units. Most of the other services could find a way to do similar events, whether at air shows or fleet weeks, that showcase both their people and their platforms. Moreover, the services should expand their recruiter assistance programs, which send successful young troops back to their hometown

to connect with recruiters and to help their friends and peers learn about life in the military. The services should provide additional incentives for participation in these programs, and they should enroll more personnel who have served for more than a year to share their experiences. Unit commanders at all levels should also encourage their subordinates to participate in outreach activities at their local high schools and service organizations whenever they do return home.

Expand Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps Programs and Offer Optional Civics Classes Through Them

We strongly endorse the recommendation from the 2020 National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service to expand the Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC) program. This program, which is offered in secondary schools throughout the country, provides leadership and citizenship instruction to more than half a million high school students each year and exposes them to the U.S. military without obliging them to join. To be clear, no student should ever be forced by school administrators to participate in a Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps program, and the Department of Defense has stressed that doing so violates its program guidelines. But the Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps program has some notable benefits, including opportunities for leadership, self-discipline, and character development — and, as discussed below, they help many young Americans gain some familiarity with the U.S. military. Yet, as one study found, the Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps program is disproportionately concentrated throughout the south and is underrepresented in almost two-thirds of U.S. states.



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As the figure shows, just under 16 percent of American youth live in the six states (plus the District of Columbia) where more than 40 percent of public high schools have a Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps program — while over 52 percent of American youth live in the 28 states where only 10 percent or fewer of public high schools offer this program. Congress should allocate the funds necessary to expand the Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps program into these seriously underrepresented states — to help increase propensity for public service among the students who choose to participate and to expand familiarity with the U.S. military throughout the entire student body.

Additionally, the Department of Defense, perhaps in partnership with the Department of Education or state education departments, should consider leveraging the Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps program to offer basic civics

courses to all interested students. Civics education and knowledge in the United States has steadfastly eroded over time. One recent survey of U.S. adults found that fewer than half of respondents could name the three branches of government, and one quarter could not identify any branch of government — while only 19 percent of native-born Americans under age 45 could pass the civics test that naturalized citizens must pass. Modestly expanding Junior Reserve Officers' Corps Training program staffing to offer such classes on citizenship could be a tremendous public good, while helping young Americans gain even a basic understanding of how the U.S. government works might also increase their willingness to consider joining the military or serving the public in some other way.

Get Serious About Recruiting More Women

All of the services need to invest far more time, energy, and money in efforts that specifically focus on recruiting qualified women, since an increasing number of women have both the education and skills needed for military service. Although women constitute just under half of the population between ages 15 and 24, more of them earn high school diplomas every year than their male peers (89.4 percent versus 84.2 percent), and more of them attend college and earn advanced degrees. In addition, more young women are physically fit than ever before. According to the NCAA, for example, girls and women constitute 43 percent of high school athletes, 47 percent of Division I college athletes, and more than 40 percent of Division II and III athletes. Yet women still only constitute 17 percent of the active force — and they are particularly underrepresented in the Army and the Marine Corps, comprising 15.5 percent and a paltry 9.1 percent, respectively. We do not expect those numbers to reach 50:50 gender parity, and we do not recommend that the services seek that as a goal. But targeted efforts to increase propensity and enlistment among the most qualified young women is a smart investment, especially since many of them have never considered joining the military.

Of course, the very real problems with sexual harassment and assault described earlier may be deterring more women from serving in the military. A recent Department of Defense youth poll, for example, found that 30 percent of those surveyed said that the possibility of sexual harassment or assault was one of the main reasons why they would not consider military service. The services and their recruiters will need to be clear and transparent about the data that exist on these issues — both to instill trust, because some women may overestimate the scale of the problem — and about the specific actions they are taking to address these problems. The Pentagon also deserves credit for rapidly issuing clear policies after the Dobbs decision to reaffirm that reproductive healthcare for servicemembers remained unchanged, and more recently for enacting policies that do not require women to disclose the reasons why they are requesting administrative leave. These policies should help reduce the concerns that some young women may have about being assigned to bases in states with newly restrictive laws, which could have decreased their propensity even further.

Reduce the Politicization of the U.S. Military in Public Discourse

Members of Congress from both sides of the aisle are publicly criticizing the U.S. military in ways that appeal to their partisan supporters — which ends up harming the very institution that they claim to be deeply concerned about. Painting the entire U.S. military as either woke or extremist undermines public support for the institution and the people in uniform, and often deflects examination of concrete problems that are affecting military capabilities and readiness. Elected officials should stop making broad assertions about the entire force and instead focus their legitimate oversight role on the senior officials who testify in front of Congress. Those officials can be asked privately about their personal views on wokeness, sexual assault, and other publicly controversial topics — which might actually prompt more candid conversations that allow both sides to discard talking points and the glare of the media. Hearings should focus on specific factual issues that affect the U.S. military's warfighting ability — and should not serve as a platform

for unsubstantiated partisan posturing by either side. Military veterans in Congress could potentially play a significant role here. As members who have personally worn the nation's uniform, they should model responsible ways to provide public oversight without resorting to deeply divisive partisan assaults upon the services as a whole or their members who are called upon to testify.

Conclusion

For 50 years, the U.S. military has relied upon an unbroken stream of willing volunteers to fill its ranks in times of peace and war. However, most of the trends that have created the present recruiting crisis will not change anytime soon, and if left unaddressed, they could soon threaten the ability of the all-volunteer force to protect the nation. A return to conscription is neither desirable nor politically viable, since as we often like to joke, the only groups in America who oppose a draft are Democrats, Republicans, and independents. So without urgent action to improve eligibility and increase propensity, the military may find itself continuing to involuntarily shrink for wholly non-strategic reasons and may soon be too small to address the growing security challenges facing the United States in the next few years and beyond.

The many intertwined causes of the recruiting crisis defy quick fixes, and none of them are likely to abate on their own even if unemployment rates increase once again. The services, military personnel and veterans, and the broader national security community all need to think creatively about ways to expand eligibility and increase propensity without undermining the strength and professionalism of the force. We hope that these recommendations provide a useful starting point for this important national conversation, and help catalyze broader efforts to develop innovative solutions to these deeply challenging problems.

BECOME A MEMBER

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