

# As U.S. Military Faces Low Recruitment, Senators Argue Biden Diversity Push

**N** [newsweek.com/us-military-faces-low-recruitment-senators-argue-biden-diversity-push-1789690](https://www.newsweek.com/us-military-faces-low-recruitment-senators-argue-biden-diversity-push-1789690)

March 22, 2023

## Politics

By Alex J. Rouhandeh On 3/22/23 at 6:41 PM EDT

Politics U.S. military Pentagon Democrats Republicans

Senators on both sides of the aisle agree that military recruitment shortfalls are a problem. What they can't agree on is how, or whether, a renewed push for diversity, equity and inclusion could be part of the issue.

Democratic lawmakers contend that the programs in line with this push, which have been championed by President Joe Biden's administration, support efforts to recruit personnel from diverse backgrounds, while Republicans argue that such programs create a problem for the military that may discourage potential recruits.

On Wednesday, senior Army, Navy and Air Force officials testified before Congress on the recruiting challenges facing the U.S. military. The three officials listed off competition with higher-paying private sector jobs, limited recruitment opportunities in schools due to COVID-19 and some 77 percent of individuals ages 17 to 21 not meeting eligibility requirements as reasons for the recruitment issues.

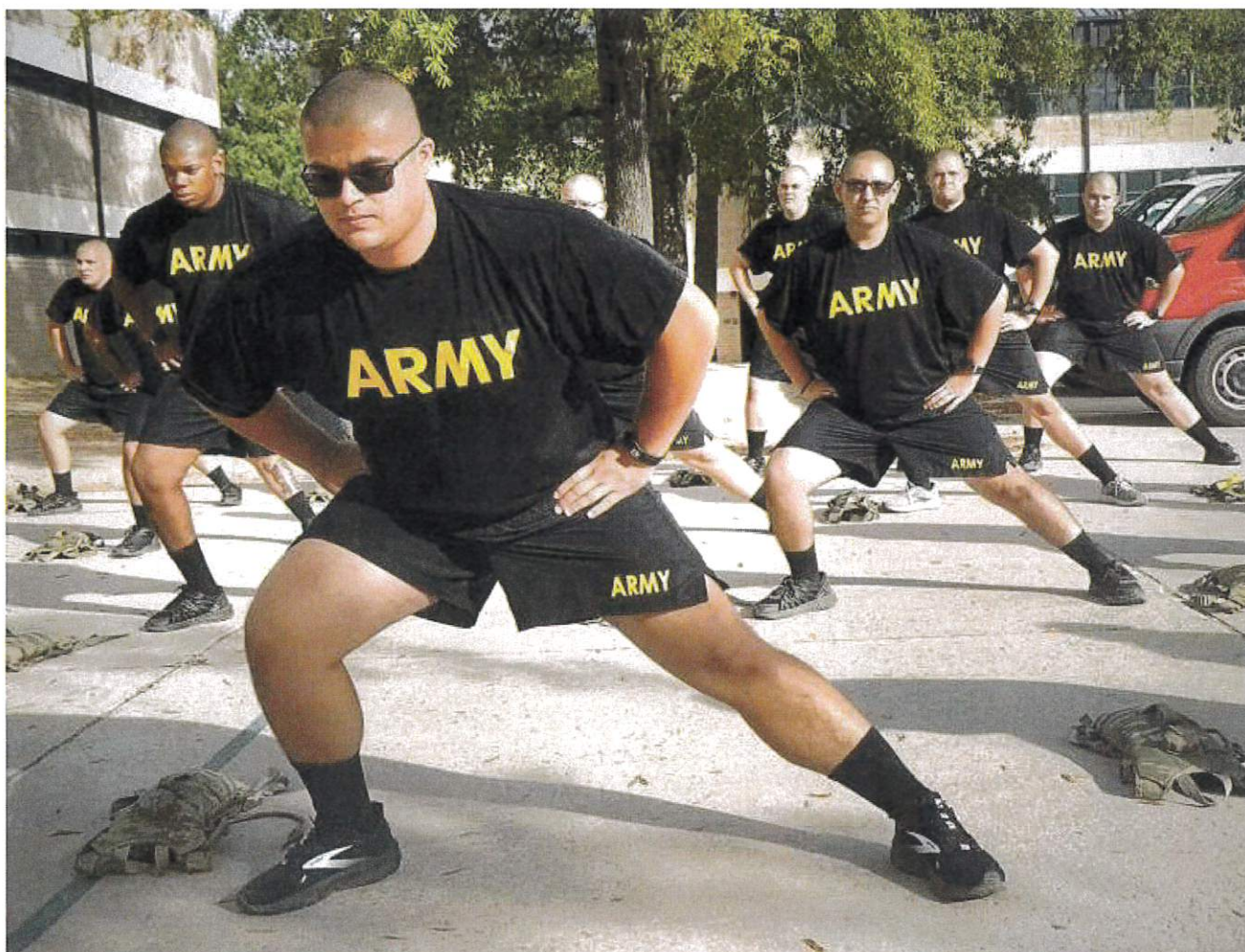
Additionally, they cited fears of injury, psychological harm and leaving loved ones as other reasons that so many in Gen Z avoid military service.

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Armed Services Committee Chair Jack Reed, a Rhode Island Democrat, noted that an Army survey conducted last year found that only 5 percent of potential recruits listed "wokeness" as an issue. He stressed that current recruitment woes are not a product of diversity, equity and inclusion programs.

"The real issue is [potential recruits] feel as though they're putting their life on hold and it's not going to be an enterprise that they can develop themselves, et cetera, when in fact there is compelling evidence that it's a great pathway," Reed told *Newsweek*.

"Exhibit A," he added, gesturing to himself—Reed served as a major in the U.S. Army.



A military recruitment center in Manhattan's Times Square is pictured on September 4, 2020, in New York City. The U.S. military faces obstacles in meeting its recruitment goals as Gen Z expresses a number of concerns regarding service. Scott Olson/Getty Images

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This is not the first time Pentagon officials have warned Congress of recruitment issues. In September 2022, Stephanie Miller, deputy assistant secretary of defense for military personnel policy, told the committee that the military anticipated to miss its recruiting goal by more than 170,000 people, something she described as an "unprecedented mission gap."

Senator Roger Wicker of Mississippi, ranking Republican on the committee and a former Air Force lieutenant colonel, disagreed with the downplaying of concerns regarding the role that diversity programs play in influencing recruits. He argued that the focus on these programs implies the military has a problem, and that discourages young people from enlisting.

The same survey that found 5 percent of respondents express concern about wokeness also found that 13 percent believe that women and minorities will face discrimination.

"[Potential recruits] somehow have a false impression that there was discrimination in the Army," Wicker told *Newsweek*. "When, absolutely, the U.S. military is the greatest civil rights organization in the history of the world, and I know that from my own personal experience."

"And so, to the extent that our own officials in this administration are broadcasting that view," he added, "I think obviously 13 percent of the respondents have somehow gotten that impression."

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Wicker cited a November 2022 study published in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* that found "the army significantly closes the Black-white earnings gap" as backing to bolster his claim that it serves as a vehicle in the advancement of civil rights.

Still, the military has faced a history of discrimination. In 2021, Reuters published the results of a 2017 survey, which was previously withheld by the Pentagon, that found "nearly a third of Black U.S. military service members reported experiencing racial discrimination, harassment or both during a 12-month period."

In the economic realm, however, a U.S. Census report from 2020 further backs Wicker's assertion of the military's role in promoting economic opportunity. It found that post-9/11 veterans are more likely to be employed than non-veterans, and also earned higher salaries.

"That younger population doesn't understand the possibilities and career potential they can get from military service," Under Secretary of the Army Gabriel Camarillo said during the hearing. "That tells us we need to reintroduce ourselves, as I said earlier, to the American public as a premier destination of choice that creates and expands opportunity for young people."

Camarillo, Under Secretary of the Navy Erik Raven, and Kristyn Jones, who is performing the duties of the under secretary of the Air Force, stressed this requires the military to rethink how it connects with young people by becoming more active on social media and retooling its recruitment pitches made in schools.



Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Senator Jack Reed, a Democrat, left, and Ranking Member Senator Roger Wicker, a Republican, right, appear at a hearing on March 9, 2023, in Washington, D.C. The two committee leaders expressed differing views regarding the impact of diversity programs on U.S. military recruitment efforts. Photo by Kevin Dietsch/Getty Images

Republican Senator Joni Ernst of Iowa, member of the committee who is a former lieutenant colonel with the Iowa Army National Guard, emphasized during the hearing that the military needs to better communicate the opportunities it offers to those who enlist. She also doubled down on Wicker's point, saying the military needs to tone back its emphasis on diversity programs and focus on the mission at hand.

"I don't believe there is an issue," she told *Newsweek*. "I think the administration is trying to make it an issue."

"When I served, color of skin, gender, it didn't matter—we were all soldiers," Ernst said. "And so, we have an administration that's trying to make it an issue and is driving a wedge between service members, and I don't think that's appropriate. We should all just be soldiers."

Democratic Senator Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts, a member of the Armed Services committee, rejected the argument that the military's efforts to increase diversity and inclusion have negatively impacted recruitment, accusing Republicans of playing politics

with the issue.

"People who are in the military, who are actually responsible for recruiting and retention, say the efforts on diversity and inclusion help them and don't hurt them," Warren told *Newsweek*. "Those are just the facts."

"The Republicans may want to play a different political game," she added, "but the reality is treating people with respect is how we make the military a more attractive place for young people to serve and a place where people want to stay."

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