

The Administration and Congress Must Act Now to Counter the Worsening Military Recruiting Crisis

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Fiscal year 2022 will be the worst year for U.S. military recruiting since the start of the all-volunteer force in 1973.

Military recruiting shortfalls are already affecting military readiness and will drive the Army to a historic low number of soldiers.

Solutions are possible: The Administration and Congress must act immediately to reverse the crisis.

U.S. military recruiting is having the worst year since the start of the all-volunteer force in 1973. The Army and other services are reporting historic challenges in achieving their recruiting goals. The Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, General Joseph Martin, is projecting that the Army will fall short of both its authorized end strength and its recruiting goals by tens of thousands of soldiers by the end of fiscal year (FY) 2023.

This is not an academic problem. A recruiting shortfall translates directly to understrength units with less combat capability. Without the necessary numbers of soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, and Space Force guardians, the most technologically advanced equipment is useless. Unless this trajectory is corrected, U.S. combat units will have diminished strength at a time when the world is increasingly presenting challenges to U.S. interests.

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Both the Administration's and Congress's reaction to this situation has been underwhelming and unequal to the size of the challenge. Both can, and must, do more—now.

2022: The Worst Year for Military Recruiting

Since the transition to an all-volunteer force in 1973, there have been years when the military services missed their recruiting goals. These include 1999, 2005, and 2018, when either the economy was booming (recruitment is generally higher when the economy is weaker) or when casualties in a conflict were perceived as too high. But FY 2022 is on track to be the worst year for military recruiting of all.¹

The Army has steadily revised its recruiting downward based on its projections of what it thought it could achieve. The Army started FY 2022 with a goal of more than 70,000 recruits for the active force.² Today, the Army believes it will fall far short of the revised goal of 55,400.³ This unattained recruiting goal will translate to a shortfall in the authorized end strength by more than 10,000 soldiers. The Army, consequently, is the smallest it has been since 1939.⁴

The prospect for 2023 is even worse. General Martin believes that the Army will have between 445,000 and 452,000 active-duty soldiers at the end of FY 2023.⁵ Faced with such personnel shortages, cuts to the force structure (such as brigade combat teams) are inevitable. Fewer combat units mean a weaker U.S. military. Every branch of the Armed Forces has been facing a recruiting challenge this year. The Navy has called 2022 “arguably the most challenging year since the start of the all-volunteer force.”⁶ But the Army is clearly having the worst of it.

The recruiting crisis is the result of the confluence of several negative factors, creating a perfect storm for recruiters. First is the tight labor market. Unemployment is near record lows (3.6 percent in June)⁷ and many organizations are having trouble finding staff. Major corporations, such as Amazon and Starbucks, are offering starting pay over \$15 an hour along with generous benefits, such as health care and education.⁸ This creates intense competition for young people.

Second, the pool of young people qualified to join the military without requiring any exception to the standards continues to shrink: It has gone from 29 percent in 2016 to 23 percent in 2022.⁹ The biggest drivers are obesity, vision, asthma, mental health issues (such as severe anxiety), low scores on the qualification test, and a history of crime.¹⁰ It has not helped matters that the Department of Defense chose 2022 to bring online a new

health care record, the Military Health System (MHS) Genesis, which has delayed the processing of new recruits. MHS Genesis provides much greater visibility into a potential recruit's prescription-drug history, but it has resulted in delays and unnecessary processing times. According to a source who prefers to remain anonymous, reportedly 7,000 volunteers are tied up in that system today that is taking an average of almost 62 days to process one application.

Given the military requirement for the COVID-19 vaccine, there is no doubt that a reluctance to receive the vaccine is contributing to the recruiting crisis. A full 36 percent of Americans ages 18 to 24 have not been fully vaccinated.¹¹

But perhaps the biggest difference from past years is that fewer young people are expressing a willingness or propensity to serve in the military. Part of this trend is a lack of knowledge about the great opportunities the military offers. That lack of knowledge is fostered by the diminishing numbers of veterans in society and the growing civil–military divide in American society.¹²

But there is more to this development. Between 2021 and 2022, the percentage of Americans who report a “great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in the military dropped from 69 percent to 64 percent.¹³ Since 2012, confidence in the military has dropped a shocking 11 percentage points from 75 percent to 64 percent.¹⁴ Some recent loss in confidence may be attributable to the disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan, but this trend started well before then.

A further detriment to recruiting efforts is the sense that the military has, within the past decade, entered the political sphere. Many Americans on the political Right believe that the military has been captured by wokeness and is being used as a social experiment, while those on the Left believe that the military is racked with rightwing extremism and white racism. These perceptions are helping to drive down the propensity of young people to serve.

The Administration's and Congress's Underwhelming Response to the Recruiting Crisis

Despite years of warning of the impending recruitment challenges, the Administration's and Congress's response to date has been underwhelming.¹⁵

The Army has furiously attempted to manipulate the levers under its control to improve the 2022 recruiting outcome. It has increased the enlistment bonus to an unprecedented \$50,000, reduced minimum enlistment contracts from a typical four years to two years, sent more noncommissioned officers to serve as recruiters, stopped recruiters from moving to new assignments, relaxed its policies on the size and location of tattoos, and even

temporarily removed the requirement for a high school/GED credential.¹⁶ None of these changes has had an appreciable impact.

Army Secretary Christine Wormuth has formed a special task force called a “tiger team” to come up with solutions.¹⁷ But the task force has been slow to come together, much less find solutions, and its participants are limited to internal Army officials.

The Army’s FY 2023 budget request reflects no urgency about recruiting: Neither the recruiting and marketing nor the Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) accounts reflects any increase above a nominal 2 percent growth for inflation from FY 2022.¹⁸

The Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) and the official directly responsible for Pentagon manpower, Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness Gilbert Cisneros, Jr., are seemingly nowhere to be found on the issue of recruiting. While recruiting is a specified function of the military services under Title 10, some help and coordination would be useful from the OSD. But that office has been silent on this issue, as largely has the Secretary of Defense.

Congress has not done much better. Neither house of Congress convened a hearing this year specifically focused on recruiting. Meanwhile, Congress held hearings on topics like the “Red Hill Bulk Fuel Facility” or “Operational Energy.” Neither carries anywhere near the consequence of a military recruiting crisis.

In both versions of the FY 2023 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) produced by the House and the Senate, there are some small signs that Congress is awakening to the problem—slowly. Section 519 of the House version of the NDAA calls for the Pentagon to produce a plan to increase the number of JROTC units—by the year 2031. Sections 597 and 598 in the House version of the NDAA call for reports on the military’s use of social media in recruiting and specific reports on Army recruiting.¹⁹ The House report on the NDAA requests briefings on the recruiting situation.²⁰ The Senate NDAA report calls for briefings on the Pentagon’s efforts to conduct tutoring and preparation for future recruits in the areas of physical fitness and the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB).²¹ These are useful, but wholly insufficient.

What the U.S. Government Can, and Should, Do Now

The first step is to recognize military recruiting for what it is: in crisis. And, that the crisis is here to stay until America figures out a way to fix it. None of the negative recruiting trends—unemployment

rates, low qualification rates, decreasing propensity—are getting better. Most military leaders believe that FY 2023 will be an even worse year for recruiting than 2022. It is far past time for the government to address this issue.

The President and key Administration officials have not emphasized the virtues and benefits of military service in their public speaking, and they must start to do so.

The Department of Defense should form a body of experienced individuals—including corporate and academic leaders as well as state and local officials with experience in personnel recruitment—to develop solutions. The solution to this problem largely does not lie within the Pentagon. New programs to incentivize and motivate America’s youth to serve should be explored. A program to forgive student debt loan could be considered if recruits successfully complete their initial tour of training. Contrary to programs that the Administration has proposed to forgive student debt *carte blanche*, a program for veterans would be appropriate for loan-forgiveness consideration given the depth of the crisis and the demonstrated commitment to serve.

Congress similarly should convene hearings to explore this issue and consider a congressional committee to devise solutions.

The Department of Defense and the Army should scrutinize the reasons why evermore young people are disqualified for military service. If it is the case that standards should be revised, they should pursue those changes. If preparatory sessions for weight loss, improved physical fitness, or higher scores on the ASVAB appear promising, the Army should pursue congressional support for such programs.²²

According to sources who prefer to remain anonymous, the Army has already begun approaching Congress to request that it shift funds between accounts in the 2022 and 2023 budgets to facilitate recruiting efforts. Congress should increase the Pentagon recruiting and marketing accounts for FY 2023 now, while the FY 2023 authorization and appropriations bills are being considered, and not wait for a future reprogramming action.

The Pentagon and the Armed Forces must not advance a woke agenda to avoid any further perception that the military is politicized, “woke,” or being used for any purpose other than to defend the nation.

Congress should act now to increase the number of JROTC programs in the country, not require another study or briefing on the issue. JROTC programs provide an excellent opportunity for the military to expose young people to the benefits of military service.

Congress should act now to increase the number of military recruiters in American cities and towns and should explore methods of authorizing the military to call upon members from operational units to assist with recruiting efforts. When young Americans meet a proud professional member of the U.S. Armed Forces, the outcome is almost always positive.

Recommendations for Alleviating the Crisis

To address this crisis, the President and key Administration officials should:

- **Emphasize** the value and benefits of military service in every public speaking opportunity.

The Secretary of Defense should:

- **Form** a group of experts, including from corporations and academia, and state and local officials, to devise solutions to address the military recruiting crisis. This group should explore ways to motivate and incentivize young people to serve, as well as examine the most common reasons why people are disqualified from service;
- **Amend** the FY 2023 Defense Department budget request, including additional requirements for recruitment and marketing;
- **Suspend** the use of the MHS Genesis system until the recruiting crisis abates;
- **Engage** with the Departments of Education, Veterans Affairs, Health and Human Services, and others as appropriate to provide inter-agency solutions;
- **Deliver** a series of legislative proposals designed to increase the effectiveness of military recruiting programs to Congress and **consider** asking Congress to require more comprehensive recruiter access to secondary schools (for those schools that accept federal funding); and
- **Engage** with cultural and societal leaders along the ideological spectrum to obtain their support to speak out in favor of military service.

The Secretaries of the Army and other services should:

- **Investigate** whether the Defense Department should implement funded preparatory programs to prepare citizens to achieve a higher score on the ASVAB, lose weight, or increase physical fitness. The Secretary of Defense should seek Congress's permission for those programs quickly.

Congress should:

- **Conduct** specific hearings on the military recruiting crisis;
- **Form** a congressional committee to consider near-term and mid-term solutions;
- **Consider** legislation improving military recruiter access to secondary schools and to require completion of the ASVAB Career Exploration Program (CEP) by all students in schools that receive federal funding; and
- **Provide** additional targeted appropriations for military recruitment in FY 2023, above the President's budget request, including for JROTC programs.

Military readiness and capability are already suffering due to this crisis. Military units are shrinking in size and readiness while the Administration and Congress dither. There are solutions to this crisis, but they require work, resources, and prioritization. Action must be immediate.

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Endnotes

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