

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-19-120T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Readiness and Management Support, Committee on Armed Services, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

The 2018 National Defense Strategy emphasizes that restoring and retaining readiness across the entire spectrum of conflict is critical to success in the emerging security environment. Air Force readiness has steadily declined primarily due to the persistent demand on a fleet that has aged and decreased in size since the 1990s. The Air Force is working to both rebuild the readiness of its forces and modernize its aging fleet to meet future threats. However, according to the Air Force, its readiness goals will take years to achieve as it continues to be challenged to rebuild readiness amid continued operational demands.

This statement provides information on Air Force (1) readiness and management challenges including personnel, equipment, training, and organization and utilization, and (2) plans to grow and modernize its force in the context of readiness recovery across DOD. Also, GAO summarizes recommendations to address these challenges and actions taken by the Air Force.

This statement is based on previously published work since 2016 related to Air Force readiness challenges, fighter pilot workforce requirements, weapon sustainment, aviation training, and force structure.

What GAO Recommends

GAO has made 14 recommendations in prior unclassified work described in this statement. DOD generally concurred with most of them and has implemented 1. Continued attention to these recommendations can assist and guide the Air Force moving forward as it seeks to rebuild the readiness of its forces.

View [GAO-19-120T](#). For more information, contact John Pendleton at (202) 512-3489 or pendletonj@gao.gov.

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AIR FORCE READINESS

Actions Needed to Rebuild Readiness and Prepare for the Future

What GAO Found

GAO's prior work has highlighted that the Air Force faces management and readiness challenges in four interrelated areas:

- **Personnel:** The Air Force has reported that pilot and aircraft maintainer shortfalls are a key challenge to rebuilding readiness. GAO found in April 2018 that the Air Force had fewer fighter pilots than authorizations for 11 of 12 years, from fiscal years 2006 through 2017. Even as unmanned aerial systems had become more prevalent and fighter pilot workloads had increased, the Air Force had not reevaluated fighter squadron requirements. GAO recommended that the Air Force reevaluate fighter pilot squadron requirements to ensure it has the pilots necessary for all missions.
- **Equipment:** Air Force aircraft availability has been limited by challenges associated with aging aircraft, maintenance, and supply support. GAO reported in September 2018 that, from fiscal year 2011 through 2016, the Air Force generally did not meet availability goals for key aircraft. Further, in October 2017 GAO found F-35 availability was below service expectations and sustainment plans did not include key requirements. GAO recommended that DOD revise F-35 sustainment plans to include requirements and decision points needed to implement the F-35 sustainment strategy.
- **Training:** The Air Force has identified the need to ensure its forces can successfully achieve missions to address a broad range of current and emerging threats. However, GAO reported in September 2016 that Air Force combat fighter squadrons did not complete annual training requirements due to aircraft availability and training range limitations, and had used the same underlying assumptions for its annual training requirements from 2012 to 2016. GAO recommended that the Air Force reassess its annual training requirements to ensure its forces can accomplish a full range of missions.
- **Organization and Utilization:** Air Force management of its force structure can also exacerbate readiness challenges. GAO found in July 2018 that the Air Force's organization of its small F-22 fleet had not maximized aircraft availability, and that its utilization of F-22s reduced opportunities for pilots to train for missions in high-threat environments. GAO found that unless the Air Force assesses the organization and use of its F-22s, F-22 units are likely to continue to experience aircraft availability and pilot training rates that are below what they could be. GAO recommended that the Air Force reassess its F-22 organizational structure to reduce risk to future operations.

Looking to the future, the Air Force will have to balance the rebuilding of its existing force with its desire to grow and modernize. To meet current and future demands, the Air Force has stated that it needs to have more squadrons. However, the costs of such growth are as yet unknown, and will have to compete with other military services looking to increase their force structure and recapitalize their forces. Even with growth, the Air Force would be dependent on the force of today for decades to come and will need to stay focused on rebuilding the readiness of existing forces. Addressing GAO's recommendations are necessary steps to meet current and future needs and can assist the Air Force moving forward.