



September 2022

SERVICEMEMBER ABSENCES

DOD Actions Needed to Enhance Related Data, Procedures, and Staffing

Why GAO Did This Study

Servicemember absences can negatively affect servicemembers, their families, and their units. Cases, such as the 2020 disappearance and murder of Army Specialist Vanessa Guillén, have provoked concerns about DOD's response to absences.

The Conference Report accompanying the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 includes a provision for GAO to review how DOD handles servicemember absences.

This report assesses the extent to which the (1) services collected and reported data on involuntary and voluntary absences during fiscal years 2017 through 2021, (2) services have established procedures for key personnel to respond to involuntary and voluntary absences, and (3) military criminal investigative organizations met staffing goals and identified staffing needs for special agents who conduct criminal investigations during fiscal years 2017 through 2021.

GAO analyzed absence and staffing data, reviewed policies, and interviewed DOD and service officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making eight recommendations, including that DOD provide guidance on collecting voluntary absence data and establish a process for reporting those data, the Marine Corps and Air Force establish procedures for responding to absences, the Army and Navy establish processes to identify special agent staffing needs, and the Air Force develop a staffing strategy for special agents. DOD generally agreed with the recommendations.

View [GAO-22-105329](#). For more information, contact Brenda S. Farrell at (202) 512-3604 or farrellb@gao.gov.

SERVICEMEMBER ABSENCES

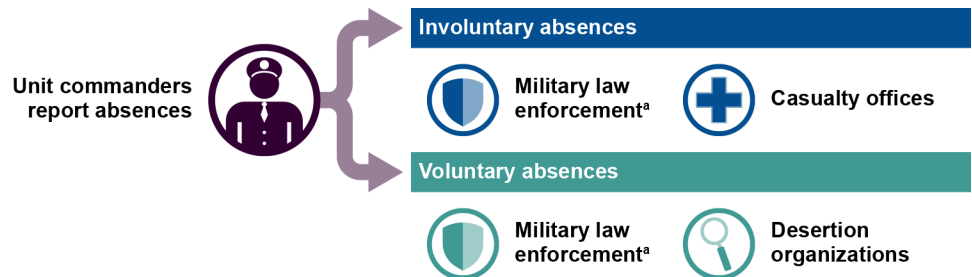
DOD Actions Needed to Enhance Related Data, Procedures, and Staffing

What GAO Found

The military services have collected and reported required data on involuntary absences, but the extent of voluntary absences is unknown. Involuntary absences are unintentional and can result from foul play or an accident, while voluntary absences are intentional and include desertions and unauthorized absences. GAO found that the services reported 157 servicemembers as involuntarily absent from fiscal years 2017 through 2021. The services also collected some data on voluntary absences during that time. However, the full extent of voluntary absences is unknown because some data were not complete or reliable. Moreover, the services did not regularly report such data to the Department of Defense (DOD). Providing data collection guidance and establishing a reporting process will better enable DOD to monitor the number of voluntary absences and assess efforts to deter and reduce them.

The services have established procedures for key personnel that address some, but not all, of their responsibilities for responding to absences. For example, all four services have established procedures for unit commanders to report absences to appropriate organizations (see figure). However, the Marine Corps has not established procedures to assist unit commanders in determining whether an absence is involuntary or voluntary. Additionally, the Air Force does not have procedures for investigating all types of absences. By establishing such procedures, the Marine Corps and Air Force will have greater assurance that absences will be properly identified and investigated.

Key Personnel and Organizations Involved in Responding to Servicemember Absences



Source: GAO analysis of military service information. | [GAO-22-105329](#)

^aMilitary law enforcement includes military criminal investigative organizations and military police.

During fiscal years 2017 through 2021, the Army, Navy, and Air Force military criminal investigative organizations met some staffing goals and identified some staffing needs for special agents who investigate servicemember absences. GAO found that the Army and Navy met or nearly met goals for filling authorized special agent positions, while the Air Force filled, on average, about 83 percent of its positions, falling short of its 100-percent goal. Also, although the Air Force identified staffing needs for special agents, the Army did not identify the number of special agents needed to fully address workload needs and the Navy could not identify the specific number of special agents needed separate from other investigative positions. Establishing processes to identify Army and Navy special agent needs and developing a strategy to meet the Air Force staffing goal will better position these services to ensure they have sufficient numbers of agents.

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Abbreviations

CID	U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Division
DOD	Department of Defense
MCIO	military criminal investigative organization
NCIS	Naval Criminal Investigative Service
OSI	Air Force Office of Special Investigations
OSD	Office of the Secretary of Defense

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September 22, 2022

Congressional Addressees

Servicemember absences can negatively affect the health, safety, and welfare of servicemembers and their families and harm unit mission readiness. Recent cases involving absent servicemembers have provoked concerns regarding the Department of Defense’s (DOD) response to such cases, and underscored the importance of promptly reporting and fully investigating all absences. For example, the April 2020 disappearance and murder of Specialist Vanessa Guillén at Fort Hood, TX, garnered widespread media attention and resulted in an independent review directed by the Secretary of the Army and an internal Army review.¹ Those reviews identified weaknesses in the Army’s procedures for responding to servicemember absences. The independent review also found that Fort Hood special agents who conduct criminal investigations were understaffed and overassigned, leading to inefficiencies and delays, particularly for complex cases involving servicemember deaths. In November 2020, the Army issued a new policy for reporting and investigating servicemember absences.²

Servicemember absences can be involuntary or voluntary. An “involuntary absence” is unintentional on the part of a servicemember and may result from foul play—as in the case of Specialist Guillén—or an accident. In contrast, a “voluntary absence” is intentional on the part of a servicemember, involving either a desertion or an unauthorized absence.³ According to DOD policy, “desertions” occur when servicemembers intend to permanently abandon their military duties, while “unauthorized absences” are generally more temporary in nature (e.g., fewer than 30 days) and occur when servicemembers are absent without authority or

¹*Report of the Fort Hood Independent Review Committee* (Nov. 6, 2020); *Army Regulation (AR) 15-6 Investigation – Fort Hood’s Command Involvement in, and Response to, the Disappearance and Death of SPC Vanessa Guillén and Other Specific Topic Areas* (Mar. 5, 2021).

²Army Directive 2020-16, *Determination and Reporting of Missing, Absent-Unknown, Absent Without Leave, and Duty Status-Whereabouts Unknown Soldiers* (Nov. 17, 2020).

³Within DOD, two terms—“unauthorized absence” and “absence without leave”—are used to refer to the same type of absence. For consistency, we use the term “unauthorized absence” in this report.

without leave.⁴ Desertions and unauthorized absences are violations of the Uniform Code of Military Justice.⁵

Various personnel within the military services share responsibility for responding to servicemember absences.⁶ For example, unit commanders may discover that a servicemember is absent, and are generally responsible for determining whether the absence is involuntary or voluntary and reporting the absence to the appropriate military organization for further action. Additionally, military law enforcement personnel are responsible for investigating involuntary and voluntary absences. For example, special agents with the three military criminal investigative organizations (MCIO)—the U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Division (CID), the Naval Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS), and the Air Force Office of Special Investigations (OSI)—investigate servicemember absences, such as when foul play is suspected or the circumstances are unusual or suspicious.⁷

The Conference Report accompanying the William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 includes a provision for us to review how the U.S. military handles servicemember absences, and we were separately asked to review the military's response to such cases.⁸ This report assesses the extent to which the (1) military services collected and reported data on involuntary and voluntary servicemember absences during fiscal years 2017 through 2021, (2) military services have established procedures for key personnel to respond to involuntary and voluntary servicemember absences, and (3) MCIOs met staffing goals and identified staffing needs for special agents

⁴DOD Instruction 1325.02, *Desertion and Unauthorized Absence or Absence Without Leave* (Oct. 26, 2021).

⁵The Uniform Code of Military Justice provides the statutory framework of the military justice system and establishes the complete code of military criminal law. Articles 85 and 86 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice (sections 885 and 886 of title 10, United States Code) are the statutory provisions regarding desertion and absence without leave (or unauthorized absence), respectively.

⁶For the purposes of this report, the term “military services” refers to the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps. We did not include the Space Force, given its status as a new organization that was established in December 2019.

⁷NCIS performs criminal investigations for both the Navy and the Marine Corps.

⁸H.R. Rep. No. 116-617, at 1645-46 (2020) (Conf. Rep.).

who conduct criminal investigations during fiscal years 2017 through 2021.

To address our objectives, we analyzed data from fiscal years 2017 through 2021 on involuntary and voluntary servicemember absences for the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps, and reviewed DOD and military service policies and procedures related to responding to servicemember absences.⁹ We also reviewed fiscal years 2017 through 2021 staffing levels, goals, and needs for special agents who conduct criminal investigations at all three MCIOs. We interviewed officials from the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), the military services, and the MCIOs.

We assessed the reliability of absence and staffing data by interviewing knowledgeable officials, reviewing the data for obvious errors or outliers, and reviewing related documentation. We found the involuntary absence data to be sufficiently reliable for the purpose of describing how many servicemembers were reported as involuntarily absent. We found the voluntary absence data to be sufficiently reliable for the purpose of describing variances across Army and Marine Corps data sources on the number of servicemembers reported as voluntarily absent, but not for determining the total number of voluntary absences, as discussed in the report. We found the MCIO staffing data to be sufficiently reliable for the purpose of describing what percentage of authorized positions were filled.¹⁰

Additionally, we assessed the military services' collection and reporting of absence data and the military services' procedures for responding to absences against DOD policies and federal internal control standards.¹¹ We also assessed the MCIOs' special agent staffing processes against

⁹We selected data from this 5-year period to analyze any trends over time and because they were the most recent data available at the time of our review.

¹⁰For the purposes of this report, the phrase "authorized positions" refers to positions that the MCIOs identified as authorized to be filled by personnel.

¹¹DOD Instruction 1300.18, *Department of Defense (DOD) Personnel Casualty Matters, Policies, and Procedures* (Jan. 8, 2008) (Incorporating Change 1, Aug. 14, 2009); DOD Instruction 1325.02; DOD Instruction 5505.03, *Initiation of Investigations by Defense Criminal Investigative Organizations* (Mar. 24, 2011) (Incorporating Change 2, Feb. 13, 2017); GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: September 2014).

DOD policy and critical success factors for human capital management.¹² Appendix I provides additional details about our objectives, scope, and methodology.

We conducted this performance audit from July 2021 to September 2022 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

Involuntary and Voluntary Servicemember Absences

Involuntary servicemember absences are unintentional on the part of the servicemember and can result from foul play or an accident. DOD considers servicemembers who are involuntarily absent to be casualties.¹³ DOD casualty policy defines two casualty statuses that can apply to an involuntary absence that occurs in non-hostile settings:

- “duty status-whereabouts unknown,” which is a transitory status that is used when a commander suspects a servicemember’s absence is involuntary but does not feel sufficient evidence currently exists to determine whether the servicemember is missing or deceased; and
- “missing,” which is a status for a servicemember who is not present at the servicemember’s duty location due to apparent involuntary reasons and whose location is unknown.¹⁴

Voluntary absences—specifically, desertions or unauthorized absences—are intentional on the part of the servicemember, and, according to DOD policy, occur when servicemembers are absent without authority or

¹²DOD Directive 1100.4, *Guidance for Manpower Management* (Feb. 12, 2005); GAO, *A Model of Strategic Human Capital Management*, [GAO-02-373SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 15, 2002).

¹³According to DOD Instruction 1300.18, a “casualty” is any person who is lost to the organization by having been declared dead, duty status-whereabouts unknown, excused absence-whereabouts unknown, missing, ill, or injured. A casualty—including an involuntary absence—can occur in both hostile and non-hostile settings. This report addresses involuntary absences in non-hostile settings.

¹⁴DOD Instruction 1300.18.

without leave from the unit, organization, or other place of duty where they are required to be.¹⁵ Unauthorized absences may be classified as desertions if certain criteria are met. For example, DOD policy states that an absent servicemember is to be classified as a deserter when the servicemember has been absent for 30 consecutive days; if the facts and circumstances of the absence, regardless of its length, show that the servicemember may have committed the offense of desertion; or if the servicemember, while in a foreign country, requests or accepts asylum or a residence permit from that country.¹⁶

DOD Roles and Responsibilities for Responding to Servicemember Absences

Various DOD personnel and organizations have roles and responsibilities related to involuntary and voluntary servicemember absences. For example, the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness is responsible for establishing DOD-wide policies on responding to both involuntary absences and voluntary absences, which include desertions and unauthorized absences.¹⁷ The Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness is also responsible for providing policy guidance to the military services on their activities related to involuntary and voluntary absences—which include reporting involuntary absences when they occur, deterring and reducing voluntary absences, and apprehending deserters and absentees as quickly as possible.

Several offices within the military services are responsible for developing policies and overseeing activities related to the reporting of and response to involuntary and voluntary absences. These include the Army's Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel and the Army Human Resources Command; the Navy's Office of the Chief of Naval Personnel and the Navy Personnel Command; the Air Force's Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Manpower, Personnel, and Services and the Air Force Personnel

¹⁵DOD Instruction 1325.02.

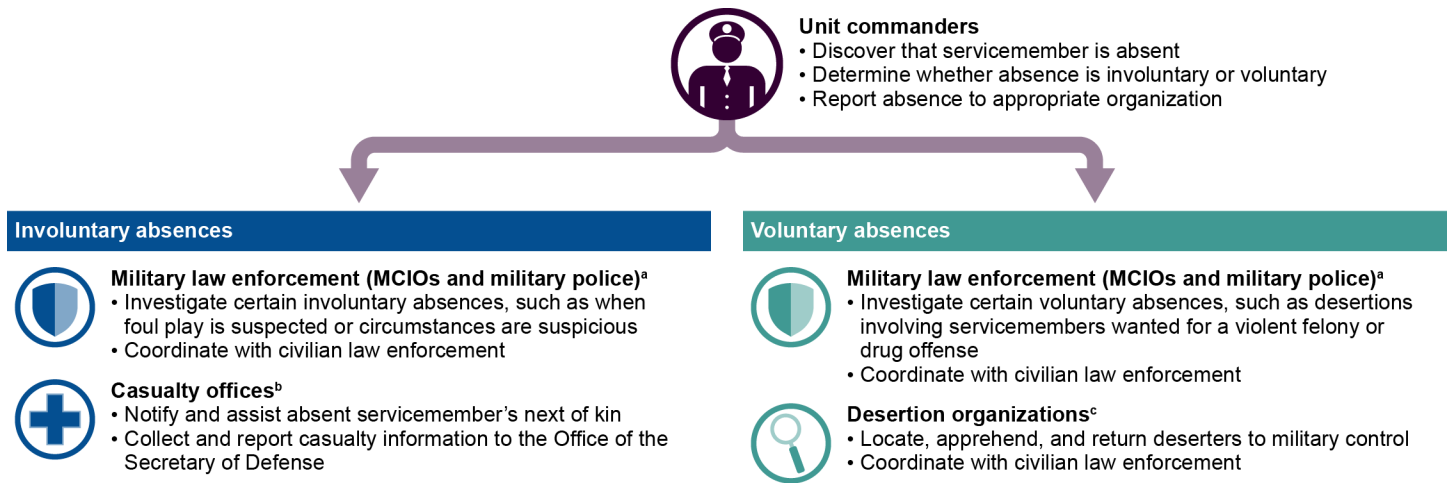
¹⁶According to Article 85 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice, servicemembers are guilty of desertion if, for example, they go or remain absent from their unit, organization, or place of duty without authorization and with intent to remain away permanently; quit their unit, organization, or place of duty with intent to avoid hazardous duty or to shirk important service; or enter any foreign armed service except when authorized by the United States.

¹⁷DOD Directive 5124.10, *Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs (ASD(M&RA))* (Mar. 14, 2018); DOD Directive 5124.02, *Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness (USD(P&R))* (June 23, 2008). According to DOD Directive 5124.10, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs—which is under the authority, direction, and control of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness—develops policy for, and provides oversight of, casualty and mortuary affairs programs.

Center; and the Marine Corps' Office of the Deputy Commandant for Manpower and Reserve Affairs and Office of the Deputy Commandant for Plans, Policies, and Operations.

Additionally, figure 1 shows the key personnel and organizations within the military services that are involved in responding to servicemember absences, including unit commanders, military law enforcement, casualty offices, and desertion organizations.

Figure 1: Key Personnel and Organizations Involved in Responding to Servicemember Absences



MCIO Military criminal investigative organization

Source: GAO analysis of military service information. | GAO-22-105329

^aThe military criminal investigative organizations (MCIO) investigate violent crimes and other serious offenses, which can include servicemember absences. There are three MCIOs—the U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Division, the Naval Criminal Investigative Service (which performs criminal investigations for both the Navy and the Marine Corps), and the Air Force Office of Special Investigations. We use the term military police to refer to installation law enforcement, which typically handles less serious offenses and may be involved in the initial investigation of a servicemember absence. Military police, or installation law enforcement, includes the Army and Marine Corps Military Police, Air Force Security Forces, and Navy Master-at-Arms.

^bThe military services’ casualty offices include the Army Casualty and Mortuary Affairs Operations Division; Navy Casualty (PERS-00C); the Air Force Casualty Matters Division; and the Marine Corps Marine and Family Programs Division.

^cThe Navy and the Marine Corps have dedicated desertion offices—the Navy Absentee Collection and Information Center and the Marine Corps Absentee Collection Center, respectively—for locating and returning deserters. In contrast, the Army relies on its military police and the Air Force relies on the Office of Special Investigations for these functions.

The Military Services Have Collected and Reported Data on Involuntary Absences, but the Extent of Voluntary Absences Is Unknown

The Military Services Collected and Reported Required Data on Involuntary Absences during Fiscal Years 2017 through 2021

The military services collected and reported required data on involuntary absences during fiscal years 2017 through 2021. Per DOD policy, the military services reported these data to OSD through a centralized DOD information system used to report casualties, including involuntary absences.¹⁸ Specifically, we found that the services reported 157 servicemembers as involuntarily absent in a non-hostile setting from fiscal years 2017 through 2021. The number of involuntary absences varied each fiscal year, ranging from 19 to 53. Table 1 shows the number of servicemembers reported as involuntarily absent by the military services from fiscal years 2017 through 2021.

Table 1: Servicemembers Reported as Involuntarily Absent in a Non-Hostile Setting, by Military Service, Fiscal Years 2017 through 2021

Fiscal year	Army	Navy	Air Force	Marine Corps	Total
2017	8	23	2	20	53
2018	1	15	9	6	31
2019	4	3	5	7	19
2020	4	4	5	10	23
2021	10	10	7	4	31
Total	27	55	28	47	157

• Source: GAO analysis of DOD data. | GAO-22-105329

Note: Involuntary absences were initially reported as “duty status-whereabouts unknown” casualties, with the exception of one Navy servicemember in fiscal year 2017, who was reported as “missing.”

¹⁸DOD Instruction 1300.18. The Defense Casualty Information Processing System is DOD’s system of record for reporting casualty data.

The Navy and Marine Corps experienced the highest number of involuntary absences during fiscal years 2017 through 2021, a substantial proportion of which were attributable to a small number of events that occurred in certain years. For example, in fiscal year 2017, 17 of the 23 involuntary absences reported by the Navy resulted from two separate collisions involving the USS *Fitzgerald* and USS *John S. McCain*, and 18 of the 20 involuntary absences reported by the Marine Corps resulted from two aircraft incidents. Our analysis also found that about 61 percent of the involuntary absences during fiscal years 2017 through 2021 occurred when the servicemembers were on-duty, during training and in other non-hostile settings, and about 39 percent occurred when the servicemembers were off-duty, resulting from incidents such as automobile accidents, drownings, suicide, or foul play. Additionally, over 90 percent of the servicemembers that were reported as involuntarily absent during this time were ultimately found to be deceased.

The Military Services Collected and Reported Some Data on Voluntary Absences during Fiscal Years 2017 through 2021, but the Full Extent of Such Absences Is Unknown

The military services collected some data during fiscal years 2017 through 2021 on the number of voluntary absences (i.e., desertions and unauthorized absences) in various types of information systems. However, the full extent of voluntary absences over this 5-year period is unknown, as some of the data in these systems were not complete or reliable, and the military services do not regularly report data on voluntary absences to OSD.

Figure 2 shows information systems used by the military services to collect voluntary absence data. These systems, which are used for different purposes and collect different types of data, include personnel systems that collect data on changes in a servicemember's duty status, including voluntary absences; pay systems that collect data on changes in pay status, which can occur due to an absence or other circumstances; and law enforcement systems that collect data on criminal offenses, such as desertion.¹⁹

¹⁹According to DOD's financial management regulation, unauthorized absences longer than 24 hours may affect pay and benefits. DOD Financial Management Regulation 7000.14-R, Volume 7A: "Military Pay Policy – Active Duty and Reserve Pay," April 2021. The Army, the Navy, and the Air Force use the Defense Joint Military Pay System as their pay system, while the Marine Corps uses the Marine Corps Total Force System as its pay system.

Figure 2: Information Systems Used to Collect Data on Voluntary Absences for Servicemembers

	Army	Navy	Air Force	Marine Corps
Personnel	Electronic Military Personnel Office	Not applicable ^a	Military Personnel Data System	Marine Corps Total Force System
Pay	Defense Joint Military Pay System			
Law Enforcement	Army Law Enforcement Reporting and Tracking System	Corrections Management Information System	Not applicable ^b	Law Enforcement and Corrections Database

Source: GAO analysis of military service information. | GAO-22-105329

^aNavy officials stated that the Navy cannot use its current personnel system to collect service-wide data on unauthorized absences.

^bAir Force officials stated that the Air Force uses its personnel system to collect data on desertions and unauthorized absences.

Our analysis found that some of the voluntary absence data in these information systems were not complete or reliable. As a result, we were unable to determine the total number of voluntary absences within each military service or across the military services for fiscal years 2017 through 2021. For example:

- Army.** Army policy states that the Army’s personnel system is the system of record for Army personnel accounting and that it should be used to record changes in duty status, including voluntary absences such as desertions and unauthorized absences.²⁰ Additionally, Army policy states that such voluntary absences should be recorded in the Army’s law enforcement system.²¹ However, we found that the number of voluntary absences differed between these two systems. For example, the number of desertions in the personnel system at the time of our review ranged from about 50 to 130 annually from fiscal years 2017 through 2021, while the number of desertions in the law enforcement system ranged from about 250 to 500 annually over the same period. Army officials stated that the personnel system, which Army policy designates as the system of record for voluntary absences, may contain a lower number of desertions and other voluntary absences because the system purges data 130 days after

²⁰AR 600-8-6, *Personnel Accounting and Strength Reporting* (Apr. 1, 2015). Personnel accounting is the recording and tracking of data on personnel when they arrive, depart, change duty location, change duty status, change assignment eligibility and availability, or change grade.

²¹AR 190-45, *Law Enforcement Reporting* (Sept. 27, 2016).

servicemembers leave the service.²² As a result, we were unable to determine the total number of voluntary absences for the Army for fiscal years 2017 through 2021.

- **Navy.** The Navy's desertion office collected service-wide data on the number of desertions for fiscal years 2017 through 2021 in its law enforcement system, but the Navy did not collect service-wide data for these years on unauthorized absences. As a result, the total number of voluntary absences for the Navy from fiscal years 2017 through 2021 is unknown. Navy officials stated that the Navy is developing a capability to collect all types of voluntary absence data within its new personnel system and that this capability is expected to be available in January 2024.
- **Air Force.** The Air Force collected data on desertions and unauthorized absences in its personnel system, which Air Force officials stated is the system of record for voluntary absence data. However, Air Force officials stated that this system may include data on voluntary absences that commanders later determined were not the fault of servicemembers, and thus should not be considered to be an unauthorized absence or desertion. For example, Air Force officials told us that a unit commander may report an unauthorized absence if a servicemember does not report for duty, but later determine that the absence was not unauthorized because the servicemember was in the hospital. As a result, data from this system may not reflect the number of actual voluntary absences for fiscal years 2017 through 2021.
- **Marine Corps.** The Marine Corps' personnel and pay system only collected complete data on voluntary absences for fiscal year 2021. According to Marine Corps policy, the personnel and pay system is the authoritative source of information for servicemember data and is to be used for recording desertions and unauthorized absences.²³ Marine Corps officials told us that the system had complete data for fiscal year 2021 only because it purges data 2 years after a servicemember leaves the Marine Corps. As a result, at the time of our review, data from this system were not available on all

²²Army officials stated that some servicemember data are retained in a separate database that is managed by Army Human Resources Command. However, this database is not the Army system of record for personnel accountability, which is the Army personnel system. Army officials also confirmed that the Army's personnel system is considered the authoritative source of information for data on voluntary absences.

²³Marine Corps Order 1000.6, *Assignment, Classification, and Travel System Manual (ACTSMAN)* (July 3, 2013); Marine Corps Order 1620.3A, *Marine Corps Absentee and Deserter Apprehension Program* (Dec. 27, 2011).

servicemembers that were reported as voluntarily absent in fiscal years 2017 through 2020, according to Marine Corps officials. Additionally, although the Marine Corps' desertion office also collects data on desertions, we found that office's fiscal year 2021 data showed about 20 fewer desertions than the fiscal year 2021 data from the Marine Corps' personnel and pay system. Marine Corps officials stated that the variance likely results from some desertions being entered erroneously into the personnel and pay system or from desertions not being reported to the desertion office.

According to DOD policy on voluntary absences, the department's objective is to reduce and deter servicemember desertions and unauthorized absences. OSD—specifically, the Executive Director of the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness—is responsible for providing overall policy guidance for military service programs to reduce and deter these absences.²⁴ Additionally, federal internal control standards state that management should use quality information that is complete and reliable to achieve the organization's objectives.²⁵ However, some of the military services' data on desertions and unauthorized absences were not complete or reliable because DOD policy does not provide guidance to the military services on collecting complete and reliable voluntary absence data.²⁶ As a result, the full extent of voluntary absences is unknown.

We also found that the military services do not regularly report data to OSD on the number and trends of voluntary servicemember absences. Further, although some of the military services internally report data on voluntary absences, this reporting is limited. For example, the Army has internally published annual crime reports that include numbers and trends for voluntary absences from the Army's law enforcement system. However, as noted above, the data in this system differ from the Army's personnel system, which is the system of record for personnel accounting in the Army. Additionally, the Air Force internally reports each month on the number of active Air Force deserters who have not yet been apprehended, but these reports do not include complete data on the number or trends of desertions. Officials from the Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps stated that they do not internally report data on numbers

²⁴DOD Instruction 1325.02.

²⁵[GAO-14-704G](#).

²⁶DOD Instruction 1325.02.

and trends of all voluntary absences for military service leadership to review on a regular basis.

The military services do not regularly report on the number and trends of voluntary absences because OSD has not established a process for this reporting to occur. Prior DOD policy directed the military services to report to OSD twice each fiscal year on the number of desertions and unauthorized absences that occurred among enlisted servicemembers, but this requirement was removed from the policy in 2012.²⁷ OSD officials with whom we spoke did not know why the policy was changed. These officials, along with officials from the Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps, also stated that voluntary absences are rare occurrences, and that reporting data on these absences may therefore not be necessary.

However, in the absence of complete and reliable data on voluntary absences, decision makers in OSD and the military services will not know the full extent to which such absences are occurring within each military service and across the department. By providing guidance to the military services on collecting complete and reliable voluntary absence data, and by establishing a process for the military services to regularly report these data, OSD will be better positioned to monitor the overall number of voluntary absences and assess department-wide efforts to deter and reduce them.

Military Service Procedures Address Some, but Not All, Responsibilities for Key Personnel

²⁷DOD Directive 1325.2, *Desertion and Unauthorized Absence* (Aug. 2, 2004) was replaced by DOD Instruction 1325.02, *Desertion and Unauthorized Absence* (Nov. 16, 2012).

The Military Services Have Procedures for Reporting Absences, but the Marine Corps Lacks Procedures for Determining Whether Absences Are Involuntary or Voluntary

The military services have established procedures for unit commanders to report involuntary and voluntary absences to designated organizations. Determining which type of absence has occurred can affect the way the military services respond to the absence. For example, if the absence is involuntary, unit commanders within each of the four military services are required to report the absence to the military service's casualty office, which is to notify and provide assistance to the servicemember's family, and to military law enforcement, which will investigate the case. In contrast, if the absence is a desertion, which is voluntary, unit commanders are to report the absence to their military service's designated desertion organization—the Navy and Marine Corps desertion offices, the Air Force Personnel Center's missing persons branch, and Army military police.

To assist unit commanders in reporting absences to the appropriate organization, the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force have also established procedures for making the initial determination as to whether an absence is involuntary or voluntary. For example, after the disappearance and murder of Specialist Vanessa Guillén at Fort Hood, TX, the Army issued policy that included a checklist of steps that unit commanders are to take to determine whether an absence is involuntary or voluntary.²⁸ These steps include speaking with other unit members to determine if they believe the absence is involuntary, contacting local medical treatment facilities to try to determine the servicemember's whereabouts, and communicating with the servicemember's family to provide updates and obtain information. Depending on the outcome of these initial steps, the Army unit commander is to determine whether the absence is involuntary or voluntary, and report that information to the Army's casualty office and law enforcement, as appropriate.

Similarly, Navy policy includes procedures that unit commanders are to follow to determine whether an absence is involuntary or voluntary before reporting the absence to the appropriate organization.²⁹ These actions include trying to determine the location of the servicemember by visiting and inspecting the servicemember's living area, communicating with coworkers and peers, and reviewing social media accounts. Likewise, Air

²⁸Army Directive 2020-16. This directive also includes procedures for installation public affairs offices, to include identifying a spokesperson and developing plans to engage with the media and social media.

²⁹Navy MILPERS Manual 1600-040, *Procedures for Commands to Which Enlisted and Officer Absentees Are Attached* (Feb. 9, 2021).

Force policy states that unit commanders should take certain steps when determining the type of absence, such as considering the servicemember's relationships with a spouse or coworkers and checking whether the servicemember's personal belongings are missing.³⁰ Air Force policy also specifies factors that can help unit commanders determine whether the absence is involuntary or voluntary, including whether the servicemember returned from a recreational activity (e.g., swimming or hiking) before going missing or left personal belongings (e.g., military identification card, wallet, and keys) behind in their residence.

In contrast, the Marine Corps has not established procedures for unit commanders to use when determining if an absence is involuntary or voluntary. DOD policies state that the military services are to report involuntary and voluntary personnel absences and to apprehend deserters and absentees as promptly as possible.³¹ Additionally, federal internal control standards state that organizations should design control activities to achieve objectives and implement control activities through policies.³² According to Marine Corps officials, procedures for determining whether an absence is involuntary or voluntary have not been developed because unit commanders are expected to conduct an exhaustive search for absent servicemembers, and making this determination would inherently be part of the search efforts. However, these officials acknowledged that providing specific, written guidance for unit commanders would help them make the correct determination as to whether an absence is involuntary or voluntary.

By establishing procedures for determining whether an absence is involuntary or voluntary, the Marine Corps would help ensure that unit commanders are able to properly identify the type of absence that has occurred. This, in turn, would help ensure that the absence is reported to the appropriate military organization for further action, to include notifying and assisting the servicemember's family and investigating any criminal activity associated with the absence, as necessary.

³⁰Department of the Air Force Instruction 36-3002, *Casualty Services* (Feb. 4, 2021).

³¹DOD Instruction 1300.18 and DOD Instruction 1325.02.

³²[GAO-14-704G](#).

The Army, Navy, and Marine Corps Have Established Law Enforcement Procedures for Investigating Absences, but the Air Force Has Not Done So for All Types of Absences

The Army, Navy, and Marine Corps have established procedures for military law enforcement personnel to follow when investigating servicemember absences, but the Air Force has not established procedures for investigating all types of absences. Military law enforcement—comprising the three MCIOs and military police—is responsible for investigating both involuntary and voluntary servicemember absences.³³ Such investigations are intended to, among other things, understand the circumstances under which the servicemember went missing and ultimately locate the absent servicemember.

To help ensure their MCIOs properly investigate servicemember absences, the Army and the Navy have established procedures for CID and NCIS, respectively, to follow when investigating involuntary absences. For example, CID procedures include coordinating with the military police and the servicemember’s unit commander to obtain details from any preliminary investigations into the absence, investigating information from witnesses, obtaining the absent servicemember’s latest medical and dental records, and identifying additional resources and specialized services that are needed.³⁴ Similarly, NCIS procedures begin with steps such as obtaining a full description of the absent servicemember and conducting a thorough search of the victim’s residence or other last known location.³⁵ As the investigation progresses, procedural steps include reviewing the servicemember’s online presence; conducting checks at local jails, morgues, hospitals, and psychiatric institutions; and contacting state and local law enforcement. As previously noted, NCIS performs criminal investigations for both the Navy and the Marine Corps.

Additionally, the Army and the Marine Corps have established procedures to ensure that their military police properly investigate involuntary or

³³We use the term “military police” to refer to installation law enforcement, which includes the Army and Marine Corps Military Police, Air Force Security Forces, and Navy Master-at-Arms.

³⁴Army Directive 2020-16.

³⁵NCIS-3, Chapter 42, *Missing Persons Investigations (Category 7M)* (Apr. 25, 2022). The manual also includes procedures for information that can be released to the media during an investigation, which apply to involuntary absences.

voluntary absences, as appropriate.³⁶ For example, Army procedures for military police include determining when, where, and by whom the soldier was last seen; interviewing individuals who had contact with the absent soldier; and obtaining a thorough description of the soldier. Similarly, Marine Corps procedures address activities ranging from the documentation of an initial report to recovery of the servicemember and case closure.³⁷ Unlike Army and Marine Corps military police, Navy military police are not involved in investigating servicemember absences, according to Navy officials. Instead, these functions are performed by other organizations, including NCIS and the Navy desertion office, which have procedures for investigating involuntary and voluntary absences, respectively, as previously described.

In contrast, the Air Force has not established procedures for its military law enforcement to follow when investigating all types of servicemember absences. Specifically, although OSI policy establishes procedures for investigating certain types of voluntary absence cases—such as desertions—it does not address the investigation of involuntary absences.³⁸ Air Force officials acknowledged that policy and guidance are needed for OSI investigations of involuntary absences, and stated that the Air Force plans to include procedures for investigating involuntary absences in a revised OSI manual on criminal investigations. However, these procedures had not been established at the time of our review; officials estimated that the revised manual would be issued in December 2022.

Further, although Air Force policy states that military police are normally responsible for investigating voluntary unauthorized absences, the Air Force has not established specific procedures for conducting such

³⁶Army and Marine Corps military police may be the first law enforcement personnel to be notified of a servicemember's absence before it is determined whether the absence is involuntary or voluntary, and thus can be involved in investigating both types of absences.

³⁷Marine Corps Order 5580.2B, *Law Enforcement Manual* (Dec. 30, 2015). The procedures in this manual for investigating servicemember absences are similar to practices recommended by the International Association of Chiefs of Police. According to a Marine Corps official, the Marine Corps has regular interaction with this organization on law enforcement matters. International Association of Chiefs of Police, *Model Policy: Missing Persons*, Alexandria, VA (September 1994).

³⁸AFOSIMAN 71-122, vol. 1, *Criminal Investigations* (Mar. 19, 2020) (incorporating AFOSI Guidance Memorandum 2021-01, Apr. 21, 2021). The Air Force's procedures for responding to desertion cases address, among other things, coordinating with civilian law enforcement and interacting with the media.

investigations.³⁹ Officials from the Air Force’s Directorate of Security Forces, which oversees Air Force military police policy, acknowledged that current policy—which is being revised—may be ambiguous. They also noted that specific procedures for military police to investigate unauthorized absences may not be necessary because most installations will likely notify OSI to perform the investigation. However, OSI officials disagreed, stating that military police, not OSI, should investigate unauthorized absences. Moreover, as noted, Air Force policy states that military police normally investigate unauthorized absences.

DOD policy states that the military services are to apprehend deserters and absentees as promptly as possible.⁴⁰ DOD policy also states that MCIOs can initiate investigations if a servicemember was the victim of a crime.⁴¹ According to federal internal control standards, organizations should assign responsibility to achieve their objectives, design control activities to achieve objectives, and implement control activities through policies.⁴² By ensuring that procedures for responding to involuntary absences are established in OSI’s revised criminal investigations manual or in other guidance, the Air Force will have greater assurance that OSI special agents and other criminal investigator staff will have the guidance they need to properly investigate these types of absences. Additionally, by clearly defining the responsibilities and procedures for military police in responding to voluntary unauthorized absences, the Air Force will help ensure that its law enforcement personnel have greater clarity on who is responsible for investigating such cases, along with the guidance needed to conduct those investigations.

³⁹Air Force Instruction 71-101, vol. 1, *Criminal Investigations Program* (July 1, 2019). The Air Force uses the term “absence without leave” instead of “unauthorized absence.” We use the term “unauthorized absence” for consistency.

⁴⁰DOD Instruction 1325.02.

⁴¹DOD Instruction 5505.03.

⁴²[GAO-14-704G](#).

MCIOs Have Not Fully Met Staffing Goals or Identified Staffing Needs for Special Agents

During fiscal years 2017 through 2021, the Army, Navy, and Air Force MCIOs—CID, NCIS, and OSI, respectively—met some staffing goals and identified some staffing needs for special agents who conduct criminal investigations, including investigations of servicemember absences. Specifically, we found that, on average, CID and NCIS nearly met and met their goals for filling authorized special agent positions, respectively, but OSI did not.⁴³ Additionally, we found that OSI identified special agent staffing needs, but that CID did not identify the number of special agents it needed independent from its authorizations and that NCIS could not identify the specific number of special agents needed separate from other criminal investigative staff. MCIO special agents lead investigations of major criminal offenses with support from other staff, such as intelligence analysts and forensic specialists.

CID. Analyzing CID data for fiscal years 2017 through 2021, we found that CID filled, on average, about 97 percent of its authorized positions for special agents who conduct criminal investigations, nearly meeting CID's goal to fill 100 percent of such positions.⁴⁴ Across this period, CID increased its percentage of filled authorized special agent positions from about 92 percent in fiscal year 2017 to about 99 percent in fiscal year 2021.

Although CID nearly met its special agent staffing goals from fiscal years 2017 through 2021, it did not identify its staffing needs for special agents independent from the number of authorizations it received during this period of time. According to CID, it is authorized a specific number of special agents each year who are then assigned to Army locations based on each location's share of CID's overall criminal investigation workload. However, CID officials stated that this process is limited to assigning agents based on CID's fiscal year authorizations and that it is not intended to identify the number of special agents that are needed to address CID's workload, which may differ from the number of authorized positions.

⁴³MCIO officials stated that their respective military departments authorize a certain number of positions that can be filled each year for special agents and, in the case of NCIS, other criminal investigative staff. For the purposes of this report, the phrase "authorized positions" refers to positions that the MCIOs identified as authorized to be filled by personnel.

⁴⁴From fiscal years 2017 through 2021, CID had, on average, about 1,400 special agents who conduct criminal investigations.

According to CID officials, the number of special agent positions that CID is authorized to fill each fiscal year is determined primarily by a modeling process that the Army uses to generate staffing needs for all types of units and organizations—not just CID—based on battlefield scenarios. CID conducts its operations during peacetime at Army installations around the world and when deployed to a battlefield environment. Specifically, CID officials stated that the Army models estimate how many special agents would be needed to conduct CID’s battlefield operations, which include mentoring local national criminal investigators and police, recovering forensic and biometric evidence, providing logistics security, conducting force protection operations, and investigating war crimes.

However, CID officials stated that this modeling process does not take into account CID’s responsibilities and workload for conducting criminal investigations at Army installations that are separate from CID’s battlefield role. As a result, officials stated, the process does not accurately reflect what CID requires at domestic Army locations to conduct criminal investigations, and more special agents are likely needed to address the agency’s investigative workload. These officials further stated that not having enough special agents on hand can result in investigations taking longer to complete, and that high workload levels at CID have historically led to staff leaving the agency. CID officials stated that the CID Director intends for CID to eventually identify how many special agents are needed based on investigative workload, but as of June 2022 CID had not yet established plans to do so.⁴⁵

NCIS. Analyzing NCIS data for fiscal years 2017 through 2021, we found that NCIS filled on average about 99 percent of its authorized positions for staff (including special agents) who conduct or support criminal investigations, meeting NCIS’s goal to fill 96 to 98 percent of authorized

⁴⁵The current CID Director was hired in September 2021 as part of an ongoing organizational reform effort that CID is undertaking in response to findings from the Fort Hood Independent Review Committee. Other steps CID intends to take as part of this reform include hiring additional civilian special agents. Historically, both the CID Director and most CID special agents have been military personnel.

positions in 4 of the 5 years.⁴⁶ The Navy authorizes NCIS to hire a broad range of criminal investigative staff positions, to include special agents as well as intelligence analysts, digital forensic examiners, administrative support, and other support staff, according to NCIS officials. These officials stated that within this broad range of staff, special agents have the most comprehensive investigative skillset and can lead all types of investigations. For example, NCIS special agents lead the investigation of Navy and Marine Corps servicemember absences when foul play is suspected and when the disappearance involves unusual or suspicious circumstances.

NCIS identified staffing needs during fiscal years 2017 through 2021 for its broad range of staff who conduct or support criminal investigations, determining in each year that it needed more staff than NCIS was authorized to hire. However, NCIS could not identify the specific number of special agents that were needed during this period of time. For example, NCIS determined that it needed approximately 770 more staff who conduct or support criminal investigations than were authorized in fiscal year 2021, but did not specifically identify how many of these positions were for special agents. NCIS officials stated that needs for criminal investigative staff exceeded authorizations due to factors including increased workload from rising sexual assault investigations—which increased by over 100 percent over the last 10 years—and the need to compete with other Navy priorities for funding.

NCIS officials stated that they determine the number of special agents needed each year to conduct criminal investigations. However, according to officials, they do not have a process for identifying what those specific numbers are for later review and do not maintain data on how many agents are needed separate from the overall number of criminal investigative staff. Instead, officials stated, staffing needs are reviewed throughout the year, with special agents and other types of criminal investigative staff being hired or transferred within the agency to address workload requirements. NCIS officials stated that this approach affords them the flexibility to hire different types of staff depending on evolving

⁴⁶NCIS's staffing goals for filling authorized positions apply to authorizations for staff who conduct and support criminal investigations, to include both special agents and other staff. NCIS's staffing goal was to fill 96 percent of authorized positions in fiscal years 2017 through 2019 and to fill 98 percent of authorized positions in fiscal years 2020 and 2021. NCIS met its staffing goal each year except fiscal year 2021, when it filled about 97 percent of authorized positions, according to our analysis of NCIS data. From fiscal years 2017 through 2021, NCIS had, on average, about 700 special agents who conduct criminal investigations.

needs throughout the year. However, it is unclear how NCIS can fully evaluate whether its special agent staffing levels are sufficient without identifying how many agents NCIS determined it needed to meet its criminal investigation workload. Moreover, identifying how many special agents are needed would not prevent NCIS from hiring other criminal investigative staff throughout the year based on factors such as workload and the applicant pools for special agents and other positions.

OSI. Analyzing OSI data for fiscal years 2017 through 2021, we found that OSI filled, on average, about 83 percent of its authorized positions for special agents who conduct criminal investigations, lower than OSI's goal to fill 100 percent of such positions.⁴⁷ Across this period, the percentage of positions that were filled was relatively flat, ranging from 81 to 84 percent. OSI officials stated that this sustained staffing gap has contributed to longer case times and the need to prioritize certain cases, such as those involving violent crimes, over others, such as drug offenses. For example, according to OSI officials, the staffing gap and corresponding need to prioritize cases contributed to a reduction in the number of drug investigations that OSI opened each year, decreasing by over 80 percent from fiscal years 2017 through 2021.⁴⁸

OSI has identified staffing needs for special agents who conduct criminal investigations and, according to OSI officials, determined that it needs approximately 100 more special agents than it was authorized to hire during fiscal years 2017 through 2021. According to OSI officials, additional agents are needed to specifically address OSI's workload involving sexual assault and domestic violence crimes, which has increased subsequent to the 2019 transfer of investigative responsibility for certain types of assault cases from the Air Force military police to OSI special agents.⁴⁹

⁴⁷From fiscal years 2017 through 2021, OSI had, on average, approximately 800 special agents who conduct criminal investigations.

⁴⁸According to OSI officials, staffing gaps have led OSI to refer certain drug cases to Air Force military police for investigation, which is permitted by Air Force Instruction 71-101, vol. 1.

⁴⁹The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019 added language to the Uniform Code of Military Justice making all assaults by strangulation or suffocation "aggravated," rather than "simple" assaults, which caused all such offenses to be investigated by OSI and not military police effective January 1, 2019. See Pub. L. No. 115-232, § 531 (2018).

OSI officials also cited a number of potential factors for why OSI has not met its staffing goal for special agents who conduct criminal investigations. For example, officials stated that OSI's focus in recent years has been on hiring special agents to conduct counterintelligence operations, not criminal investigations. These officials also stated that OSI faces competition from other federal law enforcement agencies, and that the pool of experienced applicants is limited. Further, OSI officials noted that military special agents often transfer to different positions in order to gain broader experience within the Air Force, creating a need to fill those vacated positions.

According to OSI officials, the agency has undertaken or will be initiating actions intended to increase special agent staffing levels—such as hiring additional recruiters, applicants with less experience, and more civilian agents. The Air Force has also authorized OSI to hire 76 more special agents from fiscal years 2023 through 2024, according to OSI. However, these actions are not part of an overall strategy to meet staffing goals for special agents who conduct criminal investigations and may therefore not fully address historical staffing challenges that have affected OSI's ability to meet its special agent staffing goal. Moreover, absent a strategy to increase its special agent levels, OSI may have difficulty filling the additional positions it has been authorized to hire over the next 2 fiscal years. OSI officials acknowledged that developing such a strategy would likely help the agency meet its goal to fill 100 percent of authorized special agent positions.

DOD policy states that personnel requirements should be driven by workload.⁵⁰ Additionally, critical success factors for human capital management include identifying current and future human capital needs—such as specifying the appropriate number of employees and developing strategies to address human capital gaps.⁵¹ However, as discussed, CID and NCIS have not developed processes for identifying the specific number of special agents needed to conduct criminal investigations, and OSI has not developed a strategy to meet its staffing goal for special agents.

By establishing a process to determine the specific number of special agents needed to conduct criminal investigations, CID decision makers will have a better understanding of how many agents are needed to

⁵⁰DOD Directive 1100.4.

⁵¹[GAO-02-373SP](#).

address workload needs. As a result, they will be able to make more informed decisions on requesting and allocating resources for conducting criminal investigations, including those involving servicemember absences. Similarly, by establishing a process to identify the specific number of special agents it needs separate from the total number of criminal investigative staff, NCIS decision makers will be better positioned to evaluate whether NCIS has sufficient special agents on hand to address workload needs, and to determine whether actions are needed to address any staffing gaps. Finally, by developing a strategy to meet its staffing goal for special agents, OSI can help ensure the agency has the special agents needed to conduct criminal investigations.

Conclusions

Servicemember absences, whether involuntary or voluntary, can have devastating effects on servicemembers and their families, and significantly reduce unit mission readiness. DOD and the military services have recognized the potential for such effects and taken some corresponding steps to prevent and properly respond to both involuntary and voluntary absences. However, gaps exist. For example, the military services have collected and reported data on involuntary absences, but the extent of voluntary absences is unknown because some available data are incomplete or unreliable. Moreover, the military services do not report on the numbers and trends of voluntary absences to OSD. By providing guidance on collecting complete and reliable voluntary absence data, and by establishing a process for the military services to regularly report these data, OSD will be better positioned to monitor the overall number of voluntary absences and assess department-wide efforts to deter and reduce them.

In addition, while the military services have established procedures for key personnel to respond to servicemember absences, such as by reporting absences to designated organizations, these procedures do not address all of their responsibilities. By establishing procedures for determining whether a servicemember's absence is involuntary or voluntary, the Marine Corps would help ensure that unit commanders are able to properly identify the type of absence that has occurred and then report the absence to the proper military organization for further action. Similarly, by establishing procedures for OSI to respond to involuntary absences, and clearly defining military police responsibilities and procedures for responding to voluntary absences, the Air Force will have greater assurance that these personnel have the guidance they need to properly investigate all types of absences.

Finally, although the MCIOs met some staffing goals and identified some staffing needs for their special agents during fiscal years 2017 through 2021, CID and NCIS have not fully identified the specific number of special agents needed to conduct criminal investigations, and OSI has not met its goal for filling authorized special agent positions. By establishing processes to identify the specific number of special agents needed to conduct criminal investigations, CID and NCIS will be better positioned to evaluate whether they have a sufficient number of special agents to address workload, and make more informed decisions on resource allocation and whether actions are needed to address any staffing gaps. Additionally, by developing a strategy to meet its staffing goal for special agents, OSI can help ensure the agency has the special agents needed to conduct criminal investigations, including those involving servicemember absences.

Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making a total of eight recommendations, including two to the Secretary of Defense, two to the Secretary of the Navy, three to the Secretary of the Air Force, and one to the Secretary of the Army.

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness provides guidance to the military services on collecting complete and reliable data on the number and trends of voluntary absences. (Recommendation 1)

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness establishes a process for the military services to regularly report to OSD on the number and trends of voluntary absences. (Recommendation 2)

The Secretary of the Navy should ensure that the Commandant of the Marine Corps establishes procedures for unit commanders to use to determine whether a servicemember's absence is involuntary or voluntary. (Recommendation 3)

The Secretary of the Air Force should ensure that the Commander of OSI establishes procedures for responding to involuntary servicemember absences in the revised OSI manual for conducting criminal investigations, or in other guidance. (Recommendation 4)

The Secretary of the Air Force, in coordination with the Director of Security Forces, should clearly define in policy the responsibilities and procedures for military police in responding to voluntary unauthorized absences. (Recommendation 5)

The Secretary of the Army should ensure that the CID Director establishes a process to determine the specific number of special agents needed to conduct criminal investigations. (Recommendation 6)

The Secretary of the Navy should ensure that the NCIS Director establishes a process to identify the specific number of special agents needed to conduct criminal investigations. (Recommendation 7)

The Secretary of the Air Force should ensure that the Commander of OSI develops a strategy to meet OSI's staffing goal for special agents who conduct criminal investigations. (Recommendation 8)

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

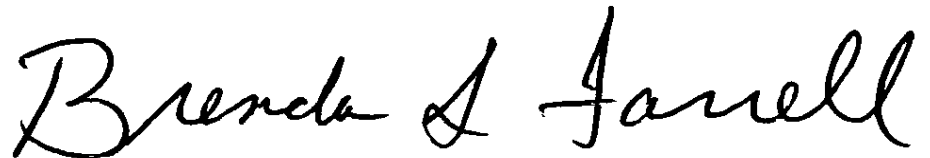
We provided a draft of this report to DOD for review and comment. In its written comments, reproduced in their entirety in appendix II, DOD generally agreed with the draft report's eight recommendations. Specifically, DOD and the military services concurred with seven recommendations and cited actions they have taken or plan to take to address them. Additionally, the Navy stated that it would concur with one recommendation contingent on a slight modification, as described below. DOD also provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

In commenting on recommendation 7 in our draft report, the Navy stated that it would concur with the recommendation if we slightly modified the wording. In our report, we acknowledge that NCIS officials stated they determine the number of special agents needed each year to conduct criminal investigations, but that they do not have a process for identifying what those specific numbers are for later review and do not maintain data on how many agents are needed separate from the overall number of criminal investigative staff. We slightly modified the wording of recommendation 7 to clarify our intent, and believe this change addresses DOD's comment.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of the Army, the Secretary of the Navy, the Secretary of the Air Force, and the Commandant of the Marine Corps. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-3604 or farrellb@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last

page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix III.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Brenda S. Farrell". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Brenda S. Farrell
Director, Defense Capabilities and Management

List of Addressees

The Honorable Jack Reed
Chairman
The Honorable James M. Inhofe
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate

The Honorable Kirsten Gillibrand
Chair
Subcommittee on Personnel
Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate

The Honorable Adam Smith
Chairman
The Honorable Mike Rogers
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
House of Representatives

The Honorable Jackie Speier
Chairwoman
Subcommittee on Military Personnel
Committee on Armed Services
House of Representatives

Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

This report assesses the extent to which the (1) military services collected and reported data on involuntary and voluntary servicemember absences during fiscal years 2017 through 2021, (2) military services have established procedures for key personnel to respond to involuntary and voluntary servicemember absences, and (3) military criminal investigative organizations (MCIO) met staffing goals and identified staffing needs for special agents who conduct criminal investigations during fiscal years 2017 through 2021.

For our first objective, we analyzed data from the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps on involuntary and voluntary absences during fiscal years 2017 through 2021. We selected data from this 5-year period to analyze any trends over time and because they were the most recent data available at the time of our review. For involuntary absences, we analyzed data from the Department of Defense's (DOD) casualty information system—the Defense Casualty Information Processing System—that the military services are required by DOD policy to report to the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD).¹ We analyzed the data to identify how many servicemembers were reported as involuntarily absent in non-hostile settings in each military service in each fiscal year and across all 5 fiscal years; what types of incidents were associated with involuntary servicemember absences; whether the servicemembers went absent while on-duty or off-duty; and whether the absent servicemembers were found to be alive or deceased. For voluntary absences, we analyzed data from relevant personnel, pay, and law enforcement information systems to identify how many servicemembers were reported in a desertion or unauthorized absence status in each military service in each fiscal year and across all 5 fiscal years.²

We assessed the reliability of these data by interviewing knowledgeable officials from OSD and the military services, reviewing the data for obvious errors or outliers, and reviewing related documentation. We found the involuntary absence data to be sufficiently reliable for the purpose of describing how many servicemembers were reported as involuntarily absent. We found the voluntary absence data to be

¹DOD Instruction 1300.18, *Department of Defense (DOD) Personnel Casualty Matters, Policies, and Procedures* (Jan. 8, 2008) (Incorporating Change 1, Aug. 14, 2009).

²We reviewed voluntary absence data from the Army's Electronic Military Personnel Office system; the Army Law Enforcement Reporting and Tracking System; the Navy's Correction Management Information System; the Air Force's Military Personnel Data System; the Marine Corps Total Force Management System; and the Marine Corps Absentee Collection Center database.

sufficiently reliable for the purpose of describing variances across Army and Marine Corps data sources on the number of servicemembers reported as voluntarily absent. However, we did not find these data to be sufficiently reliable for determining the total number of voluntary absences within each military service or across the military services from fiscal years 2017 through 2021, as discussed in the report.

To assess the extent of data collection and reporting, we reviewed DOD and military service policies on involuntary and voluntary absences, and interviewed OSD and military service officials to discuss how data on servicemember absences are collected and reported. We assessed the military services' collection and reporting of voluntary absence data against DOD policy.³ This policy states that DOD's objective is to reduce and deter voluntary absences, and that the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness is responsible for providing overall policy guidance for military service programs to reduce and deter these absences. We also determined that the information and communication component of *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* was significant to this objective, along with the underlying principle that management should use quality information to achieve the entity's objectives.⁴

For our second objective, we reviewed Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps policies and guidance documents to identify procedures for key personnel to follow when reporting and investigating involuntary and voluntary servicemember absences. Key personnel include unit commanders and military law enforcement. We also interviewed military service headquarters officials to obtain information and perspectives on the procedures for responding to servicemember absences. We assessed the military services' procedures for key personnel against DOD policies, which state that the military services are to report servicemember absences, that deserters and absentees should be apprehended as promptly as possible, and that MCIOs can initiate investigations if a

³DOD Instruction 1325.02, *Desertion and Unauthorized Absence or Absence Without Leave* (Oct. 26, 2021).

⁴GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: September 2014).

servicemember was the victim of a crime.⁵ We determined that the control environment and control activities components of *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* were significant to this objective, along with the underlying principles that management should establish an organizational structure, assign responsibility, and delegate authority to achieve the entity's objectives; design control activities to achieve objectives and respond to risks; and implement control activities through policies.⁶

For our third objective, we analyzed staffing goals and data from fiscal years 2017 through 2021 for special agents who conduct criminal investigations at the three MCIOs—the U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Division, the Naval Criminal Investigative Service, and the Air Force Office of Special Investigations.⁷ We selected data from this 5-year period to analyze any trends over time and because they were the most recent data available at the time of our review. Specifically, we analyzed MCIO staffing data to identify how many positions were authorized to be filled, how many authorized positions were filled, and how the percentage of authorized positions that were filled compared with the MCIO staffing goals.⁸ We assessed the reliability of these data by interviewing knowledgeable officials, reviewing the data for obvious errors or outliers, and reviewing related documentation. We found the MCIO staffing data to be sufficiently reliable for the purpose of describing what percentage of authorized special agent positions were filled.

We also reviewed documentation and interviewed officials from the MCIOs to obtain information on their goals for filling authorized special agent positions, and on the extent to which they have identified staffing needs for special agents. We assessed the MCIOs' special agent staffing processes against DOD policy, which states that personnel requirements

⁵DOD Instruction 1300.18; DOD Instruction 1325.02; and DOD Instruction 5505.03, *Initiation of Investigations by Defense Criminal Investigative Organizations* (Mar. 24, 2011) (Incorporating Change 2, Feb. 13, 2017).

⁶[GAO-14-704G](#).

⁷MCIOs also conduct other types of operations, such as counterintelligence.

⁸For the purposes of this report, the phrase “authorized positions” refers to positions that the MCIOs identified as authorized to be filled by personnel. The NCIS data that we analyzed included authorized positions for special agents as well as other types of criminal investigative staff, to include intelligence analysts, digital forensic examiners, and administrative support.

should be driven by workload, and against critical success factors for human capital management, which include identifying the appropriate number of employees and developing strategies to address human capital gaps.⁹

We conducted this performance audit from July 2021 to September 2022 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

⁹DOD Directive 1100.4, *Guidance for Manpower Management* (Feb. 12, 2005); GAO, *A Model of Strategic Human Capital Management*, [GAO-02-373SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 15, 2002).

Appendix II: Comments from the Department of Defense



INTELLIGENCE
AND SECURITY

UNDER SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
5000 DEFENSE PENTAGON
WASHINGTON, DC 20301-5000

Ms. Brenda Farrell
Director, Defense Capabilities and Management
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Ms. Farrell,

This is the Department of Defense (DoD) response to the GAO Draft Report GAO-22-105329, "SERVICEMEMBER ABSENCES: DOD Actions Needed to Enhance Related Data, Procedures, and Staffing" dated August 2, 2022 (GAO Code 105329). The Department's response is attached. My point of contact is Ms. Shelley Verdejo, who can be reached at shelley.a.verdejo.civ@mail.mil or 703-697-9339.

Sincerely,

DIXSON.JOHN.
P.1068423259

Digitally signed by
DIXSON.JOHN.P.1068423259
Date: 2022.09.08 16:49:18
+04'00'

John P. Dixon
Acting Director for Defense Intelligence
Counterintelligence, Law Enforcement,
& Security

**GAO DRAFT REPORT DATED AUGUST 2, 2022
GAO-22-105329**

**“SERVICEMEMBER ABSENCES: DoD Actions Needed to Enhance Related
Data, Procedures and Staffing”**

**DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE COMMENTS
TO THE GAO RECOMMENDATIONS**

RECOMMENDATION 1: The Secretary of Defense should ensure the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness provides guidance to the military services on collecting complete and reliable data on the number and trends of voluntary absences.

DoD concurs with the recommendation and will consult with the military services to develop guidance for collecting complete and reliable data on the number and trends of voluntary absences. The Department continually seeks opportunities to improve and clarify issuances as part of its issuance update process. We anticipate issuing updated guidance no later than the end of 2024.

RECOMMENDATION 2: The Secretary of Defense should ensure the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness establishes a process for the military services to regularly report to OSD on the number and trends of voluntary absences.

DoD concurs with the recommendation and will consult with the military services to establish a process for the services to report to OSD the number and trends of voluntary absences. The Department continually seeks opportunities to improve and clarify issuances as part its issuance update process. We anticipate issuing updated guidance no later than the end of 2024.

RECOMMENDATION 3: The Secretary of the Navy should ensure that the Commandant of the Marine Corps establishes procedures for unit commanders to use to determine whether a servicemember’s absence is involuntary or voluntary.

The Department of the Navy concurs with the recommendation. The Marine Corps will convene required working groups from appropriate offices involved with manpower, accountability and oversight, and security to identify and establish procedures for unit commanders to use to determine whether a servicemember's absence is involuntary or voluntary. The Marine Corps estimates implementation by November 15, 2022.

Appendix II: Comments from the Department of Defense

RECOMMENDATION 4: The Secretary of the Air Force should ensure that the Commander of OSI establishes procedures for responding to involuntary servicemembers absences in the revised OSI manual for conducting criminal investigations, or in other guidance.

The Department of the Air Force concurs with the recommendation. The Department of the Air Force will ensure that OSI works in concert with Department of the Air Force Inspector General and Security Forces stakeholders to update appropriate Air Force Office of Special Investigations and Air Force Instructions pertaining to Criminal Investigations and Law and Order. Within these publications, OSI will define the policy, responsibilities and procedures for responding to a report of an involuntary absence of a service member. The first codification of these responsibilities and procedures will be captured in updates to the AFOSI Manual covering criminal investigations. The Department of the Air Force estimates that those updates will be published by January 31, 2023.

RECOMMENDATION 5: The Secretary of the Air Force, in coordination with the Director of Security Forces, should clearly define in policy the responsibilities and procedures for military police in responding to voluntary unauthorized absences.

The Department of the Air Force concurs with the recommendation. The Department of the Air Force in coordination with the Director of Security Forces will work with appropriate stakeholders to update Air Force issuances to define the policy, responsibilities and procedures for responding to a report of voluntary unauthorized absence of a service member.

RECOMMENDATION 6: The Secretary of the Army should ensure that the CID Director establishes a process to determine the specific number of special agents needed to conduct criminal investigations.

The Department of the Army concurs with the recommendation. The CID Director has instituted a transformation process to help determine the number of special agents needed to conduct criminal investigations as part of a more holistic analysis of all investigative requirements.

CID recognizes that investigations require more than GS-1811 series/active duty special agents to enable successful investigative operations. For example, a successful criminal investigation may require the support of other personnel such as a criminal intelligence analyst (GS-1805), general investigation personnel (GS-1810), administrative personnel, military police, etc. Additionally, CID uses the sufficiency and timeliness of investigations as the primary indicators of proper staffing. The agency recently began a significant transformation from a military-heavy special agent investigative force to a more civilian-focused special agent force. Throughout this transformation and beyond, CID will continuously assess requirements related to investigative

**Appendix II: Comments from the Department
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activity, as noted above, to ensure that our investigative teams remain properly staffed and balanced to provide effective investigative capabilities.

RECOMMENDATION 7: The Secretary of the Navy should ensure that the NCIS Director establishes process to determine the specific number of special agents needed to conduct criminal investigations.

The Department and GAO, in a separate correspondence, agreed that recommendation 7 be adjusted to read “The Secretary of the Navy should ensure that the NCIS Director establishes a process to identify the specific number of special agents needed to conduct criminal investigations.” If changed, DoD concurs with the recommendation and will establish a process to identify the specific number of special agents needed to conduct criminal investigations.

RECOMMENDATION 8: The Secretary of the Air Force should ensure the Commander of OSI develops strategy to meet OSI’s staffing goal for special agents who conduct criminal investigations.

Department of the Air Force concurs with the recommendation. OSI will further develop its current strategy to appropriately establish and meet the command’s staffing goal for all special agents who conduct criminal investigations as well its other diverse mission sets.

Appendix III: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

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Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Ryan D'Amore (Assistant Director), Geoffrey Peck (Analyst-in-Charge), Vincent Buquicchio, Adrienne Fernandes-Alcantara, Christopher Gezon, Mae Jones, Ronald La Due Lake, Robert Letzler, Sean Sannwaldt, Breana Stevens, and John Wren made key contributions to this report.

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