MILITARY PERSONNEL

Armed Forces Should Clarify Tattoo Policies’ Waiver Guidance

What GAO Found

The armed forces’ policies for tattoo permissions and restrictions all focus on the content, size, and location of allowable tattoos. While the armed forces have content prohibitions for tattoos, the policies have evolved and become less restrictive regarding size and location. The current policies permit tattoos almost anywhere on the body except for on the head and face.

Navy Service Member with Allowable Tattoos

Armed forces officials GAO interviewed stated that recruiting and retention data do not include tattoo-specific data or other information that would allow an assessment of whether tattoo policies have a direct effect on recruitment and retention. Officials stated that tattoo policy updates are based on general discussions and on limited assessments of tattoo-related information, such as studies on tattoo prevalence among youth.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that each of the six armed forces updates its tattoo policy, as appropriate, to better ensure that it clearly documents whether waivers are available for recruits and service members; and provides clear guidance on eligible tattoos and requirements for requesting a waiver, among other things. DOD and the military services generally agreed, and DHS agreed, with the recommendations.

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