

DOD ACTIVE-DUTY RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION CHALLENGES

MARCH 2023

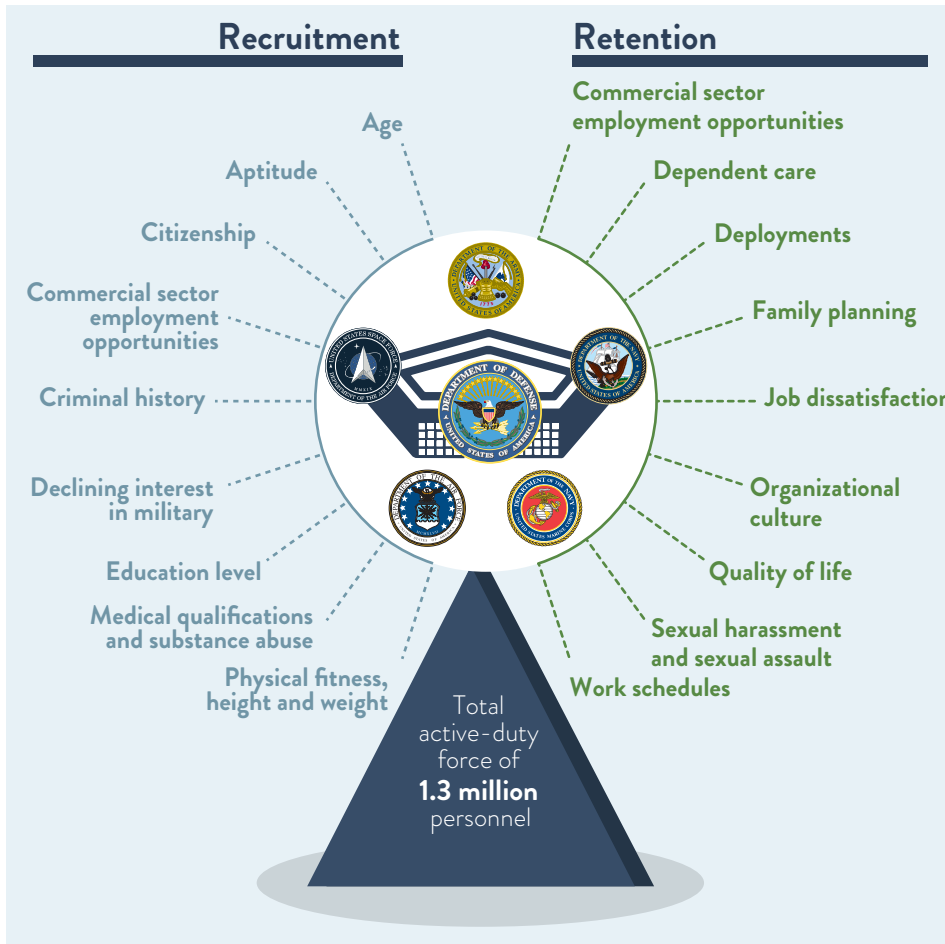
THE BIG PICTURE

Ensuring the United States has a sufficient number of qualified active-duty military personnel is a matter of national security. To maintain its active-duty levels, the Department of Defense (DOD) must balance recruiting new members and retaining already trained service members. However, DOD is facing its most challenging recruitment environment in 50 years. GAO's body of work on DOD's efforts to recruit and retain military personnel has identified challenges in the following three key areas: (1) the availability of recruitment and retention-related data (2) the use of goals, plans, and strategies; and (3) the monitoring of plans and strategies for effectiveness.

CHALLENGES TO NATIONAL SECURITY

DOD's ability to recruit and retain qualified enlisted personnel and officers is critical to maintaining unit readiness and morale, ensuring sufficient levels of experienced leaders, and avoiding unnecessary costs. A number of factors influence DOD's ability to recruit and retain active-duty personnel.

Factors Influencing Active-Duty Personnel Recruitment and Retention



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense, Congressional Research Service, and GAO information. | GAO-23-106551



IMPLICATIONS

According to DOD, only about one in four people in the United States between the ages of 17 and 24 are able to meet the recruitment requirements for military service. These include, for example, education and physical fitness standards.

DOD faces a number of challenges in retaining active-duty personnel, such as quality of life issues and opportunities for commercial sector employment.

Moreover, losing personnel is also costly for DOD. In some career fields, DOD makes substantial investments both in terms of the length of time and cost of training personnel. For example, the cost to train some cyber professionals is estimated at \$220,000 to \$500,000 over a period of 1 to 3 years.

By addressing the issues GAO has identified, DOD will be better positioned to recruit and retain a skilled and knowledgeable active-duty workforce that is ready to respond to uncertainties in the national security environment.

GAO RECOMMENDATIONS

GAO Open Recommendations Related to DOD Active-Duty Recruitment and Retention as of March 2023



COLLECT AND TRACK DATA

The Department of Defense (DOD) has not collected or tracked sufficient data to help support decisions related to its recruitment and retention efforts.

- ✓ Army, Air Force, and Marine Corps should [track cyber personnel](#) data by work role.
- ✓ Army, Navy, and Air Force should [incorporate data](#) on civilian pay for comparable occupations to guide retention bonus determinations for enlisted medical personnel.
- ✓ Navy should [include training cost information](#) in its decision-making process for awarding retention bonuses for enlisted medical personnel.
- ✓ DOD should [collect information](#) on the cost to replace current personnel, acceptance rates for retention bonuses, and private sector wages for military physicians and dentists.



DEVELOP AND USE PLANS, GOALS, AND STRATEGIES

DOD does not have sufficient plans, goals, and strategies to guide its recruitment and retention efforts.

- ✓ Army and Marine Corps should [clearly define](#) active-duty service obligations for certain cyber personnel training.
- ✓ The six armed forces' [tattoo policies should be updated](#) to clarify waiver policies and provide clear guidance on waiver eligibility and related processes.
- ✓ Army, Navy, and Air Force should [develop annual retention goals](#), by skill level, for enlisted medical personnel.
- ✓ Navy should [develop plans](#) with clearly defined goals, performance measures, and timelines for all Surface Warfare Officers and for female Surface Warfare Officers.
- ✓ DOD should [provide guidance to the military services](#) to develop plans—with clearly defined goals, performance measures, and timeframes—for female active-duty service member recruitment and retention efforts; and the services should develop such plans accordingly.
- ✓ Air Force should [analyze staffing levels](#) by officer grade to target retention bonuses to the appropriate pilot communities.



MONITOR THE EFFECTIVENESS OF EFFORTS

DOD is not positioned to fully monitor the effectiveness of its recruitment and retention efforts.

- ✓ Navy should [evaluate the effectiveness](#) of the Surface Warfare Officer career path, training, and policies.
- ✓ Air Force should [establish a comprehensive metric](#) for tracking remotely piloted aircraft personnel accession and retention efforts.
- ✓ DOD should review its special and incentive pay programs for key principles of effective human capital management and [establish measures for the efficient use of resources](#).
- ✓ DOD should [routinely assess the effect](#) of non-monetary incentive approaches, such as assignment flexibility and educational opportunities.

Source: GAO. | GAO-23-106551

ABOUT GAO

The Government Accountability Office, the audit, evaluation, and investigative arm of Congress, exists to support Congress in meeting its constitutional responsibilities and to help improve the performance and accountability of the federal government for the American people.

The underlying work supporting this product was conducted in accordance with Generally Accepted Government Auditing Standards.

This work of the United States may include copyrighted material, details at www.gao.gov/copyright.

Connect with GAO on [Facebook](#), [Flickr](#), [Twitter](#), and [YouTube](#). Subscribe to our RSS Feeds or Email Updates. Listen to our Podcasts. Visit [GAO](#) on the web.

Sources: danielfela/stock.adobe.com (cover photo).

For more information about this Snapshot, contact:
Brenda S. Farrell, Director, Defense Capabilities and Management
FarrellB@gao.gov, (202) 512-3604

Staff acknowledgments: Lori Atkinson, Jennifer Weber, Molly Callaghan, Amie Lesser, Lillian I. Ofili, and Lillian Moyano Yob.

A. Nikki Clowers, Managing Director, Congressional Relations
ClowersA@gao.gov, (202) 512-4400

Chuck Young, Managing Director, Public Affairs
YoungC1@gao.gov, (202) 512-4800

