



ATTITUDES, APTITUDES, AND ASPIRATIONS OF AMERICAN YOUTH: IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY RECRUITMENT

Maintenance of adequate recruitment levels is vital to the functioning of the American military. In recent years, changing demographic and social trends, as well as increased demand for overseas duty, have made recruitment more difficult. An understanding of the youth population will allow recruiters and other personnel to target recruitment efforts and make policy changes to encourage recruitment. A recent book from the National Research Council’s Committee on the Youth Population and Military Recruitment, *Attitudes, Aptitudes, and Aspirations of American Youth: Implications for Military Recruitment*, explores these issues.

Committee Findings and Recommendations

In 1999, approximately 3.9 million United States residents were 18 years old. This number will grow to 4.4 million by 2009, and then decrease to a plateau of between 4.1 and 4.2 million from 2015 to 2020. Projected increases in the size of the population traditionally targeted for recruitment are promising. Since the early 1990s, however, the rate of qualified youth who enlisted has moderately declined. Future

recruitment may become problematic over the next 20 years if this tendency continues. The military cannot expect to maintain adequate enlistment levels by recruiting only those individuals with a positive propensity to enlist. Steps must be taken to encourage youth with a negative propensity to take another look and reconsider the advantages military service has to offer. Several trends may help explain why fewer young people are choosing to enlist.

Youth Influencers

Parents have a critical influence on their sons’ and daughters’ career aspirations. Parents provide encouragement and validation of their children’s life ambitions and career decisions. Mothers are particularly influential and their ideological perspective to military service should be taken into account in designing effective recruitment messages.

Recommendation: Specifically targeting recruitment information towards parents, with particular attention towards mothers, may improve recruitment effectiveness. Advertising that explains the benefits of military service would give parents the information they need to encourage and support a child’s decision to join the military.

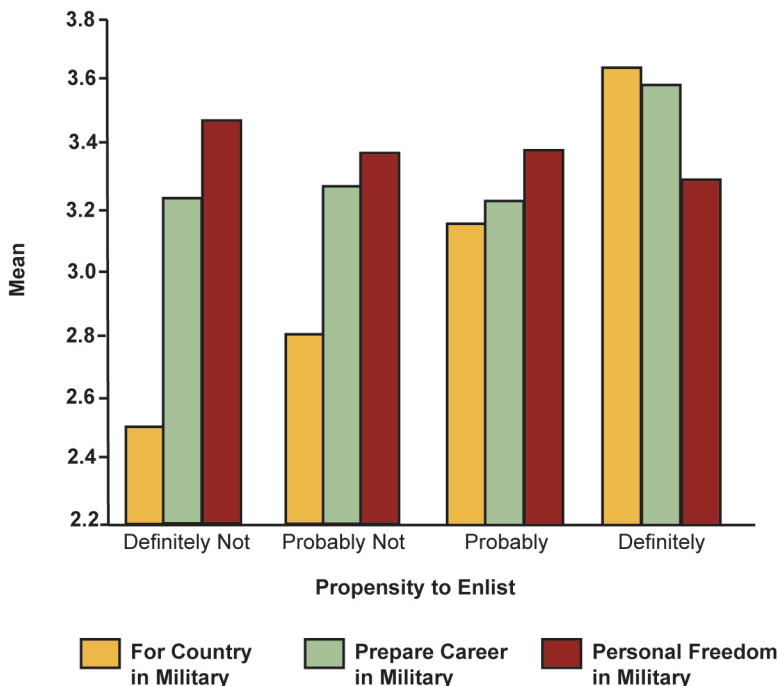
Youth Values

According to several national surveys of young people, views about youth values have remained largely unchanged over the past two decades. Two exceptions – an increase in the value placed on educational attainment and a decrease in the value placed on doing something for the country – have contributed to recruiting difficulties. Three key values may impact propensity to enlist: duty, personal freedom, and career preparation. Of these, duty is the least valued among negative propensity youths (see Figure 1). Increasing lack of interest in duty to one’s country has negative implications for military recruitment. “Finding purpose and meaning in my life” continually tops the list of important life goals among young men and women (see Table 1). The fact that youth rate this as extremely important suggests that if military service can provide such opportunities, the appeal would be strong.

Recommendation: Despite recent drops in the importance young people place on “doing something for my country,” tying duty to finding meaning may be an effective recruitment

Figure 1

Importance of Three Value Items by Propensity Group for Youth in Grades 10-12



strategy. For example, recruiters should provide information concerning the role that the military plays in protecting and furthering the goals of society. Linking personal freedom to protection of that freedom may positively impact propensity.

Youth Career Goals and Opportunities

Since the early 1990s, high school graduation rates have grown steadily, significantly impacting the environment in which recruitment occurs. Today's youth have three main options after high school: entering college, entering the civilian job force, or enlisting in the military. The earnings of college graduates are substantially higher than the earnings of those with only a high school diploma, helping to explain why, over the next 20 years, increasing numbers of high school graduates are expected to pursue higher education. Increased competition for the population traditionally targeted by the military has negative implications for recruitment.

Recommendation: The armed forces want to enlist the same highly-qualified students who expect to go to college upon high school graduation. The military should examine the feasibility of greater opportunities for recruits to complete military service and higher education simultaneously. The Committee also recommends that recruiters highlight positive aspects of military service (as contrasted to civilian employment) to prospective members. For example, military service offers more vacation time, job security, intrinsic rewards, opportunity for travel, and pay that is competitive with the civilian market for high school graduates.

Highlighting the career preparation/skill-building aspects of military service may increase youth's understanding that the military can provide experience for civilian employment.

The military traditionally targets high school seniors for recruitment. In recent years, however, a new phase in the life course between adolescence and adulthood has emerged in the youth population. This period of "emerging adulthood" often extends into the mid or late 20s, and during this time young people explore a variety of career and life options. In addition, positive aspects of military life may be more salient for this population than for younger recruits. For example, older recruits may appreciate benefits such as excellent healthcare, fitness facilities, and childcare. The military should investigate the cost-effectiveness of recruiting these older individuals.

Implications for Quality of Life Policymakers

Quality of Life policymakers could enact changes in three key areas to promote increased recruitment and retention: educational opportunities; professional training; and support systems for military members. The Committee also recommends that recruitment and retention planning, budgeting, and resource allocation should be integrated into one complementary system because they are inherently related. Specifically, increased retention may lead to less need for new recruits and vice versa. Quality of life policymakers potentially impact military manpower levels primarily through retention, rather than recruitment, efforts. Nonetheless, consideration of both recruitment and retention is valuable.

- Educational opportunities: Distance learning, tuition reimbursement
- Professional training/experience: Financial and technical literacy, leadership skills, teamwork, respect for different cultures
- Support systems: health care, fitness facilities, spousal employment services, childcare, assistance with work-life stress

Table 1 Importance Placed on Various Life Goals: Comparison of Rank Orders

How important is each of the following to you in your life?

Rank	% Extremely Important	Males 1976-80	Males 1994-98	Males Change
1	Finding purpose and meaning in my life	54.9	51.9	-3.00
2	Having lots of money	23.3	33.4	10.04
3	Making a contribution to society	18.0	21.3	3.24
4	Getting away from this area of the country	11.7	14.4	2.65
5	Living close to parents and relatives	8.2	13.0	4.84

Rank	% Extremely Important	Females 1976-80	Females 1994-98	Females Change
1	Finding purpose and meaning in my life	72.2	64.8	-7.40
2	Making a contribution to society	17.6	23.4	6.09
3	Having lots of money	12.7	20.2	7.46
4	Living close to parents and relatives	9.5	16.1	6.22
5	Getting away from this area of the country	11.9	14.0	2.15

SOURCE: Data from Monitoring the Future surveys.

NOTE: Rankings were assigned based on respondent ratings from the class years 1994 to 1998. Significance tests were calculated using *t* tests with pooled variance estimates based on percentages and adjusted for design effects, $p < 0.05$.