

# POLICY FOCUS

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## The Military Recruitment Crisis

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### HIGHLIGHT

The U.S. military is facing its greatest recruiting challenge in almost half a century with the Army, Navy, and Air Force falling short of their recruiting goals by the thousands. As the nature of operations evolves to include cyber warfare, artificial intelligence, and hypersonic weapons, and with China and Russia posing a global challenge to U.S. dominance, a shortage of capable recruits poses a significant national security threat.

### INTRODUCTION

The [Army recently announced](#) it will fail to meet its critical recruiting requirements for the second year in a row. The active-duty Army is currently at 455,000 troops and losing more soldiers than it's gaining with less than five months remaining to hit its target of 452,000 soldiers for the current fiscal year. Consequently, the nation's main ground force could experience a [significant decline of up to 7 percent](#) within a mere two-year timeframe. This reduction is particularly concerning as the Army's responsibilities are expanding both in Europe and the Pacific. Notably, the

Army plays a crucial role in providing essential coordination and support activities that are indispensable for the effective functioning of the other branches of the military.

The Army is **not the only branch** falling short with the Navy expecting to fall about 6,000 short of its goals, and the Air Force around 10,000 when taking into account the active component, Air National Guard, and Air Force Reserve.

The prevailing argument has attributed deficits predominantly to economic factors, or a byproduct of the failed Global War on Terror. However, both arguments fail to consider broader societal factors with recruitment a potential lagging indicator of a significant disconnect between citizens and their sense of patriotism and love for their country.

To address the military recruitment deficit effectively, we must prioritize civic education, foster a more salient national identity, and bridge the gap between civilian life and the military.

The status quo is no longer viable, especially in light of the formidable threat posed by our adversaries. If we fail to promptly and resolutely address these issues, the all-volunteer force will inevitably reach a breaking point, rendering it incapable of fulfilling the demands placed upon it by our nation.

## **PREVIOUSLY-RELIABLE RECRUITS ARE NOW UNRELIABLE**

The diminishing number of individuals willing to enlist in the military suggests a declining sense of civic duty and attachment to one's nation. While our military cannot function as a "family business" with children of service members the predominant source of the force, it was, until recently, a reliable pool of candidates—with the **Army reporting** in 2019 that 79 percent of recruits have a family member who served. However, The Military

Family Advisory Network found in its 2021 **Military Family Programming Survey** that 62.9 percent of military and veteran families would recommend military life, down from 74.5 percent in 2019. Such a big drop in such a short period of time is alarming.

Facing this shortage of personnel, there have been widespread Department of Defense efforts to increase recruitment with targeted messaging campaigns, changes in slogans, and broad adjustments in the overall strategy to include the Army's shift of \$1 billion to recruiting programs. However, even with this seemingly comprehensive effort, results are likely to be limited as the number of young Americans eligible to serve is at a catastrophic low of **23 percent**. This is for a number of reasons:

- COVID-19 exacerbated already-rising adolescent mental health challenges with **58 percent** of those aged 18 to 29 experiencing high levels of psychological distress at least once between March 2020 and September 2022.
- School closures and remote instruction caused test scores to decline dramatically and scores on the ASVAB, the military's standardized test for potential recruits, **declined by as much as 9 percent**.
- Youth obesity rates increased from **19 to 22 percent** during the COVID pandemic.
- Generation Z isn't interested in serving in the military and, for the first time, the majority of youth—**52 percent—have never even considered the military as an option**.

Most concerning, **the desire to serve is only at 9 percent**.

## **EROSION OF PATRIOTISM AND NATIONAL IDENTITY**

A **Wall Street Journal poll** conducted in partnership with NORC at the University of Chicago demonstrated the priorities that

helped define our national character for generations are declining in importance. One of the values they measured was patriotism. The decline was again precipitous, falling from 70 percent who reported it being “very important to them,” in 1998, to 38 percent today.

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This has now changed with a majority of Democrats in a [New York Times/Siena College national poll](#) saying they believe America is not the best country in the world. Fifty-five percent of Democrats endorsed the statement that “America is a great country but not the greatest.” Another 7 percent said the U.S. is “not a great country” with the remainder having no opinion.

By comparison, 69 percent of Republicans said the U.S. was the greatest. Another 24 percent said it’s great but not the greatest. Only 5 percent of GOP respondents said America is not a great country with the remaining 2 percent having no opinion.

Meanwhile, 47 percent of registered independents—not affiliated with any party—said America is the greatest country while 45 percent said it’s great, but not the greatest.

Just as concerning, 71 percent of Americans in an [NBC News poll](#) believe the country is headed in the wrong direction. This is the eighth time in the last nine NBC News surveys, dating back to Oct. 2021, that perception the

nation is on the wrong track has been above 70 percent. The one exception was in Sept. 2022, when it was 68 percent. Upon release of the data, [NBC stated](#), “We have never before seen this level of sustained pessimism in the 30-year-plus history of the poll.”

In an era characterized by globalization, increased individualism, and a hyper-focus on that which divides us rather than unites us, it is unsurprising there is a diminished willingness to serve in the military.

There is a unique danger in telling those who are called to fight our nation’s battles that the very nation that they are expected to sacrifice and potentially die for is inherently bad. Or that the people who make up that nation, and our military ranks, are irredeemably flawed. In short, if we cannot defend our nation rhetorically, we will be unable to do so physically.

## **WEAKENING CIVIC EDUCATION AND NATIONALISM**

The quality of civic education and the emphasis on national values have a significant impact on a society’s collective sense of patriotism. When civic education is neglected, and nationalism is undermined, it can lead to a decreased appreciation for the sacrifices made by the military and a diminished desire to contribute to the nation’s defense.

Civic education, which encompasses the teaching of democratic principles, citizenship, and active participation in public affairs, has long been considered the foundation of a healthy democracy. However, in recent years,

there has been a noticeable decline in civic education in America. Without a strong civic education foundation, societal divisions can deepen, undermining social cohesion and unity. A fragmented society is more susceptible to external manipulation and less resilient in the face of national security challenges.

The launch of the Sputnik satellite by the Soviet Union in 1957 had a profound impact on American education. In short, the event highlighted the United States' competitive disadvantage and sparked a sense of urgency to prioritize STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) education.

While it is essential to continue supporting STEM education, neglecting civic education in favor of STEM has become detrimental to national security. The funding gap between

This funding disparity persists at both the federal and state levels with catastrophic results. Today, **seven states require one year of civics or government studies**. Thirteen states have no civics course requirement at all. With so little focus and prioritization it is unsurprising that support for democracy and democratic institutions has declined.

A **2019 Rasmussen survey** alarmingly showed that 43 percent of voters nationwide at least partially agree with the statement: "The Constitution was relevant in the 18th century but has lost its relevance in the 21st century."

Military service is predicated upon an oath to that very document. It is therefore logical to conclude that if one possesses the belief that the Constitution is irrelevant then so too is military service.

**The irrelevance of military service is further exacerbated by a widening gap between civilian life and the military. As our society becomes more detached from the realities and sacrifices of military service, recruits will struggle to relate to the military's mission and purpose.**

the two is staggering. From FY 2010 to FY 2016, the federal government allocated **\$2.95 billion annually for STEM education**. This last year's omnibus bill represented the first substantial investment in civics in the last decade. While it allocated \$23 million for K-12 civics education—including a **competitive grant program** for universities and nonprofits to improve the quality and accessibility of education in civics, government, and American history inside and outside the classroom—that still accounts for less than 1 percent of what's been spent on STEM.

More succinctly, since 2000, federal spending on civics has been cut by over **90 percent** to just \$4 million a year. Annually, that's roughly **five cents per student** compared to \$50 per student on STEM.

## **DISCONNECT BETWEEN CIVILIAN LIFE, THE MILITARY, AND MASCULINITY**

The irrelevance of military service is further exacerbated by a widening gap between civilian life and the military. As our society becomes more detached from the realities and sacrifices of military service, recruits will struggle to relate to the military's mission and purpose.

Worse, recent recruitment and Department of Defense diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts seemingly prioritize equity and inclusion over the criticality of merit and lethality. Or in other words, the traditional mission and purpose of the military—to fight and win our nation's wars—has become obscured. The



message of a “softer” military runs counter to the military’s long-standing embrace of traditional masculinity. One sobering example of this was the Navy’s recent use of a “[drag queen influencer](#)” in an attempt to appeal to younger generations and inspire service.

Traditional masculine traits include competitiveness, protectiveness, aggressiveness, assertiveness, sexual appetite, appreciating truth over feeling, confidence, self-reliance, and independence, to name a few. There are few professions, if any, that ascribe more value to these qualities than the military.

Historically, our military system explicitly and implicitly placed a premium on the masculinity of our warfighters. In fact, modern-day and historical warfare and masculinity are undeniably intertwined and nearly inseparable. The ancient Greek word for courage, *andreia*, literally meant manliness. Virgil opens his epic poem, the Aeneid, with “I sing of arms and a man.” And the Latin word for man, *vir*, strongly related to courage on the battlefield and is the origin of the English word virtue.

Yet, our culture is shifting away from the embrace of such qualities and calling into question their relevance. For boys and men, the primary recruitment pool, seeking a last bastion of such values, ongoing recruitment efforts that have been cartoonish and effeminate are potential deterrents to service.

## CONCLUSION

Military recruitment deficits should not be viewed solely through an economic lens. Instead, they can be seen as a reflection of a broader societal disconnect, encompassing a lack of patriotism, love of country, and a sense of shared values.

To address this issue effectively, we must prioritize civic education, foster national identity, bridge the gap between civilian life and the

military, and engage in open discussions about the importance of serving one’s country. By reinvigorating the sense of patriotism and collective responsibility, we can work towards ensuring a strong and committed military capable of safeguarding our nation’s interests.

The promising news is that the importance of civic education, in particular, is one of the rare issues on which Americans agree. A recent national poll conducted by Frank Luntz established a [majority of respondents \(57 percent\)](#), representing a wide variety of beliefs, identified civic education as the most important tool for rebuilding a stronger American identity.

Congress also seems to understand the necessity, as evidenced by the bipartisan “[Educating for Democracy Act of 2020](#),” introduced in both the House and Senate. Moreover, two bipartisan commissions in 2020, the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service and the Cyberspace Solarium Commission, included expansions and investments in civic education as key recommendations in their final reports.

The world is an increasingly dangerous place. For now, warfare remains a predominantly human endeavor. It is Americans, often young Americans, who fill our ranks and operate our weapon systems. There’s a phrase often used in the military, “getting left of bang.” It means you have accurately observed pre-event indicators or warning signs of what’s to come and acted proactively to prevent it or meet it head-on. Being on the opposite end of the timeline is referred to as being “right of bang.”

We are now “right of bang,” and headed to a much louder one if we fail to heed the alarm bells ringing. We must directly address ongoing challenges within the Department of Defense, and broader society, to find ways to reach our youngest generations currently unfit, unready, and uninterested in service to our nation.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO

### Get Informed

Learn more about the degree requirements policy. Check out:

- [The Military Recruiting Crisis is a Symptom of Cultural Rot](#)
- [What The Data Says About the Military Recruiting Crisis](#)
- [Military Recruiting Faces Its Biggest Challenge in Years](#)

### Talk to Your Friends

Help your friends and family understand these important issues. Share this information, tell them about what's going on and encourage them to join you in getting involved.

### Become a Leader in the Community

Start an Independent Women's Network chapter group so you can get together with friends each month to talk about a political/policy issue (it will be fun!). Write a letter to the editor. Show up at local government meetings and make your opinions known. Go to rallies. Better yet, organize rallies! A few motivated people can change the world.

### Remain Engaged Politically

Too many good citizens see election time as the only time they need to pay attention to politics. We need everyone to pay attention and hold elected officials accountable. Let your Representatives know your opinions. After all, they are supposed to work for you!

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Independent Women's Forum (IWF) is dedicated to building support for free markets, limited government, and individual responsibility. IWF, a non-partisan, 501(c)(3) research and educational institution, seeks to combat the too-common presumption that women want and benefit from big government, and build awareness of the ways that women are better served by greater economic freedom. By aggressively seeking earned media, providing easy-to-read, timely publications and commentary, and reaching out to the public, we seek to cultivate support for these important principles and encourage women to join us in working to return the country to limited, Constitutional government.