



# Defense Primer: Active Component Enlisted Recruiting

## Congressional Role

The Constitution provides Congress with broad powers over the Armed Forces, including the power “To raise and support Armies” and “To provide and maintain a Navy.” In the exercise of this authority, Congress has historically shown great interest in military recruiting, which is critical to maintaining a fully manned and capable military workforce. Congress exercises a powerful influence on recruiting through its establishment of personnel end-strength levels for the Active Components and Reserve Components. Higher end-strengths generally require a greater number of new recruits, higher rates of retention among current servicemembers, or some combination of the two. Through its oversight powers, Congress monitors the performance of the executive branch in managing the size and quality of the military workforce. Congress influences the achievement of recruiting goals by the armed services in a number of ways:

- authorizing military compensation packages that are competitive with civilian employers (e.g., basic pay, recruiting bonuses, educational and health care benefits);
- establishing criteria that affect eligibility for enlistment such as age, cognitive, behavioral, and citizenship requirements; and
- funding recruiting programs that provide for dedicated recruiters, market research, advertising, and military entrance processing stations.

The policy levers most commonly used to manage recruiting include varying the number of recruiters, funding for advertising, and funding for enlistment incentives. When recruiting shortfalls occur, or are anticipated, Congress may elect to apply additional resources to these mechanisms. Likewise, when recruiting is expected to be strong, Congress may elect to shift resources away from these areas.

## Recruiting

Without a robust ability to bring new personnel into the military, the armed services would lack sufficient manpower to carry out mission essential tasks in the near term. Moreover, without stable recruiting levels they would lack a sufficient pool of entry-level personnel to develop into the mid-level and upper-level leaders of the future. To maintain a healthy military force structure, each armed service sets goals for new personnel *accessions* each fiscal year for both its Active and Reserve Components. Officer and enlisted goals are set separately. For enlisted personnel, there are both *quantity* and *quality* goals.

### Quantity Goals

Quantity goals are typically based on each armed service’s projected need for new personnel (both officer and enlisted)

over the course of the year to meet its congressionally authorized end-strength. Enlisted quantity goals are based on the proportion of congressionally authorized end-strength that a specific armed service and component allocates to its enlisted force, less the projected number of currently serving enlisted personnel it expects to retain through the end of the year. As a hypothetical example, assume an armed service has an authorized Active Component end-strength of 200,000 total personnel, comprised of 30,000 officers and 170,000 enlisted personnel. If it projects that it will retain 140,000 of its current enlisted personnel through the end of the fiscal year, it might set a goal of enlisting 30,000 new individuals for that year plus a certain number more to account for those new enlistees who are separated before the end of the year (for example, for medical disability). The actual number of new enlistees needed may also change during the year as new projections are made about the retention of currently serving enlisted personnel, or if the armed service must increase or decrease the total size of its force (for example, if a Service Secretary were to exercise the authority of 10 U.S.C. §115(g)(1)(A) to increase congressionally authorized active duty end-strength for that armed service by up to 2%). **Table 1** lists recruit quantity goals and results for FY2020-FY2022.

### Quality Goals

Quality goals are only for new enlistees without any previous military service, also known as *non-prior service* (NPS) recruits.

Two principal Department of Defense (DOD) quality benchmarks apply to NPS recruits. The first quality benchmark is the percentage of NPS enlistees who are high school diploma graduates (HSDG). The second quality benchmark is the percentage of scores above average on the Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT Categories I-III). Since FY1993, the DOD’s quality benchmarks for recruit quality have stipulated that at least 90% of NPS enlistees must be high school diploma graduates, and at least 60% must score above average on the AFQT. Supplementary ways to assess the quality of enlistment cohorts include the percentage of NPS enlistees who score well-below average on the AFQT (Category IV) and the number and types of enlistment waivers granted to enlistees for medical reasons, misconduct, or drug use. DOD regulations require that no more than 4% of an annual enlistment cohort may be Category IV (10<sup>th</sup>-30<sup>th</sup> percentile on the AFQT). In addition, no one in Category V (1<sup>st</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> percentile on the AFQT) may be admitted into the U.S. Armed Forces. In the case of waivers, there is no official benchmark. **Table 2** and **Table 3** list recruit quality benchmarks and results for FY2020-FY2022.

**Table 1. Non-Prior Service Accessions Data (Quantity)**

Active Component Enlisted Personnel, FY2020-FY2022

Armed Service	FY2020			FY2021			FY2022		
	Goal	Achieved	Percent of Goal	Goal	Achieved	Percent of Goal	Goal	Achieved	Percent of Goal
Army	61,200	61,249	100.1%	57,500	57,606	100.2%	60,000	44,901	74.8%
Navy	39,600	39,678	100.2%	33,400	33,559	100.5%	33,400	33,442	100.1%
Marine Corps	28,028	28,048	100.1%	30,607	30,617	100.0%	28,600	28,608	100.0%
Air Force	26,373	26,373	100.0%	26,641	26,656	100.1%	26,196	26,196	100.0%
Space Force	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	521	532	102.1%

**Source:** Department of Defense. **Note:** Fiscal Year 2022 is the first year results for the newly established Space Force have been reported.

**Table 2. Non-Prior Service Accessions Data (Quality – High School Diploma Graduates)**

Active Component Enlisted Personnel, FY2020-FY2022

Armed Service	DOD Benchmark	Achieved FY2020	Achieved FY2021	Achieved FY2022
Army	90%	95.8%	94.2%	94.2%
Navy	90%	97.4%	97.5%	96.9%
Marine Corps	90%	99.5%	99.5%	98.9%
Air Force	90%	98.5%	98.6%	98.5%
Space Force	90%	n.a.	n.a.	99.6%

**Source:** Department of Defense. **Note:** Fiscal Year 2022 is the first year results for the newly established Space Force have been reported.

**Table 3. Non-Prior Service Accessions Data (Quality – Above Average AFQT Score)**

Active Component Enlisted Personnel, FY2020-FY2022

Armed Service	DOD Benchmark	Achieved FY2020	Achieved FY2021	Achieved FY2022
Army	60%	62.9%	62.2%	60.2%
Navy	60%	70.2%	69.0%	65.1%
Marine Corps	60%	69.5%	69.4%	66.5%
Air Force	60%	82.2%	83.6%	82.2%
Space Force	60%	n.a.	n.a.	99.4%

**Source:** Department of Defense. **Note:** Fiscal Year 2022 is the first year results for the newly established Space Force have been reported.

**Relevant Statutes**

Title 10, Chapter 31, of the U.S. Code  
10 U.S.C. §115

**Other Resources**

DOD Instruction 1304.26, Qualification Standards for Enlistment, Appointment, and Induction  
DOD Instruction 6130.03, Medical Standards for Appointment, Enlistment or Induction in the Military Services  
Defense Manpower Data Center, DOD Personnel, Workforce Reports, and Publications.

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