

Addressing The Recruitment And Attrition Challenges In The U.S. Army: A Qualitative Study On Manning The Force

CW4 Linda R. Horton, U.S. Army National Guard

Developing an effective recruiting and retention model requires thoroughly examining methods to enhance the current program. Considering the purpose of my study, a qualitative methodology was chosen as the most appropriate design for exploring why individuals are not joining the Army, reasons for leaving the Army, job satisfaction, and the overall work environment. The study aims to understand the needs and motivations of individuals and soldiers so that the Army can create strategies to attract and retain talent, ultimately leading to a motivated and more effective force.

The problem addressed by this study is that the number of individuals recruited to serve in the U.S. Army has decreased by 41% since 1987 (U.S. Department of Defense, 2024), and approximately 30% of enlisted Soldiers leave the Army within the first 36 months (Marrone, 2020). Reduced recruitment can lead to systemic and operational challenges, such as staffing shortages in critical roles, compromising the force's ability to effectively undertake and sustain Army operations (Bastian & Hall, 2020). With fewer recruits, an urgency exists to field them without adequate training, potentially lowering units' overall readiness and effectiveness (Ben-Ari et al., 2023). As existing personnel are required to take on additional responsibilities or face extended deployments, morale can suffer, potentially leading to higher attrition rates (Phelps et al., 2024). When recruitment and retention levels are insufficient or low, this can lead to a shortage of personnel, which can, in turn, affect the military's preparedness and capacity to carry out its international obligations and respond to various threats and challenges.

Furthermore, it can also strain the existing personnel and resources, potentially impacting morale and overall effectiveness. This could, in turn, undermine the U.S. military's credibility and influence on the global stage. Finally, insufficient recruitment levels can weaken the U.S. military's standing on a global scale, impacting its ability to engage in international relations and defense commitments.

Attrition is another considerable challenge in the U.S. Army. The Army has the highest attrition rate of all military branches; after 36 months, the attrition rate in the Army is estimated to be 30%, compared to 19% in the Marine Corps and 23% in the Navy and Air Force (Marrone, 2020). Challenges with recruitment also appear to be branch-specific. While the U.S. Army's recruitment declined by approximately 15% between 2011 and 2020, the Air Force's recruitment remained the same, and the Navy experienced a 6% increase in recruitment (U.S. Department of Defense, 2024). Like recruitment challenges, attrition from the Army can increase training and replacement costs, operational readiness, and Soldier morale (Hughes et al., 2020; Marrone et al., 2021). The reasons for the Army's decreased recruitment and high attrition rate compared to the other branches are unknown, necessitating further research.

Purpose and Research Questions

The central thesis of this paper is that the U.S. Army should establish an aggressive recruiting and retention strategy to implement Manning the Force. This qualitative descriptive study aims to understand why young people choose not to join the U.S. Army and why Soldiers attrit from the Army within or after their first term. To address this purpose, two research questions were devised:

RQ1: What are the reasons that young people cite for not joining the U.S. Army?

RQ2: What are the reasons Army Soldiers cite for attrition or leaving the Army after one term?

Methodology

This study used a qualitative descriptive research design to address the study's purpose and research questions. The qualitative methodology is used when researchers want to gain individuals' perspectives, opinions, beliefs, and thoughts about the central phenomenon (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). This methodology aligns with the study's research questions of why individuals do not join or leave the Army. A descriptive research design was chosen for this study because this design allows the researcher to describe a central phenomenon from the participants' perspectives (Doyle et al., 2020). The descriptive design is also flexible, allowing researchers to explore a phenomenon using a variety of research methods (Kim et al., 2017). This flexibility in design allowed for a qualitative survey consisting of five survey questions to be designed for the study:

1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender
3. Did you serve in the military? If so, why did you join?
4. If you did not serve in the military, why did you not join?
5. If you did serve in the military and did not reenlist for a second term, why did you make that choice?

The main method of sampling in this study was snowball sampling. A strength of snowball sampling is its ability to reach hidden subpopulations, such as those required for this study (Leighton et al., 2021). The survey was disseminated through the researcher's professional network for this study. During the recruitment stage, the researcher requested that her colleagues in her professional network send the survey to their professional colleagues' after responses were gathered by email, each individual was assigned a pseudonym to de-identify them in the data reporting.

Collected Data

Participants' Reasons for Not Joining the Military

Participant	Age	Gender	Excerpt from Survey
P1	52	F	"I wanted to join the military when I graduated from high school; however, the Desert Storm War was going on, and I got scared."
P2	41	M	"Flatfooted and wasn't aware I could get a waiver."
P3	33	F	"Overall, my decision to not join the military is a lack of knowledge about it."
P4	40	F	"Fear of losing my freedom, but I regret it now as an adult."
P5	24	F	"As a collective, my family members who were enlisted held medical, administrative, and direct combat positions, and growing up, I had observed the toll and sacrifice that it took on their family and mental health."
P6	24	F	"I didn't want to commit/complete basic training."
P7	27	M	"My grandfather and uncles all served in the military, and all of them have various conditions that they all suffer from that can be directly traced back to their service in the military, including PTSD and loss of limbs."

Table 1: Participants' Reason for Not Join the Army

Two participants did not have sufficient information. Two expressed fear, one expressed disinterest, and two expressed displeasure with watching their family members suffer challenges post-military.

Two participants joined the military but did not reenlist. P8, an African-American male, said, "The reason I left was due to personal conflict with my NCO, so instead of creating a situation that could adversely affect my enlistment, I separated." P9 felt compelled not to reenlist due to family obligations. P9 said, "I got out after my first term due to going on two deployments back-to-back. I felt I was missing too many important milestones with my young children."

Six participants joined the military and stayed for their careers. These participants had insights that may help improve retention. P10 explained, "They were offering me a chance to have a place to live, eat, and make money at the same time, as well as a chance to go to school if I wanted to. This was a career, not a job, and I already saw the advantages." P11 also expressed the chance to better their life to be critical in their decision. P11 said, "I decided to enlist in the Army because I needed a solid foundation and a career to care for my family." For P10 and P11, the military provided a stable career trajectory. Two participants reported joining for the benefits offered by the military. P12 said, "Educational benefits."

Moreover, P13 said, "I initially joined because I became a dad right out of high school. My mom suggested that I look into the military because of the benefits. The rest is history." The final participant, P14, joined due to patriotism. P14 said, "I have always felt a deep sense of duty and patriotism. Serving my country was a way for me to give back and contribute to our nation." For P14, while the reasons may have varied, each participant derived pleasure from service and remained in the military for their careers.

Researcher's Positionality

After three years in my high school Junior ROTC, I was eager to join the Army. Since my friends were planning to attend college, I also enrolled. However, after two semesters of college, I returned home for the summer, working at a local manufacturing company. It was here that my life took an unexpected turn. The supervisor, a First Sergeant in the local National Guard unit, was instrumental in my decision to join the guard. His influence was so significant that I can confidently say I would not have joined the National Guard without his recruitment. He emphasized the opportunities for personal and professional growth, the chance to serve my country, the benefits and support provided to Soldiers and their families, and the opportunity to impact the world positively. He also shared his experience and the opportunity that the military gave him to have a better life and provide for his family. I have since served for 25 years and enjoy serving my country.

Recommendations

1. Showcase the benefits and rewards of a military career to inspire and motivate potential recruits through effective outreach and marketing campaigns by the Army.
2. Expand the Army's presence and involvement within the community to strengthen ties and build positive relationships.
3. Establish partnerships with outside agencies such as Walmart, Target, and Amazon to collaborate on developing new recruiting technologies and systems, thereby enhancing the military's capabilities.

4. Provide opportunities for career advancement and professional development to maintain Soldiers' motivation and commitment to service.
5. Recognize the critical role of military families in a Soldier's decision to stay in the Army and create a positive and supportive environment for them to show care and empathy.
6. Increase the participation of military bands in the community, allowing Soldiers to share their positive stories and experiences.
7. Invite students, family members, retirees, and Soldiers already serving at events such as the Twilight Tattoo to foster a sense of community and camaraderie.
8. Focus on leadership development to ensure that today's leaders are equipped to become future leaders.

Conclusion

After conducting the study, it was evident that lack of knowledge about the military, fear, and displeasure were the primary deterrents for potential recruits. Based on these findings, developing an effective recruiting and retention program is crucial for the Army to address these challenges. Soldiers serving in the Army should tell their stories and show individuals what success looks like in the Army. Insufficient or low recruitment and retention levels can have a profound impact, leading to a shortage of personnel. This, in turn, can severely affect the military's readiness and capacity to fulfill its international obligations and respond to various threats and challenges. Ensuring the United States has sufficient qualified military personnel is a matter of national security.

Implementing the study's recommendations will enable the Army to formulate strategies within "Man the Force" that will attract new talent and retain existing Soldiers. By doing so, the Army can build a motivated and more effective force.



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