



Recruits call home during scheduled divisional phone calls at Navy's Recruit Training Command, Great Lakes, Illinois, December 9, 2023 (U.S. Navy/Stuart Posada)

Stop Talking to Yourself

Military Recruiting in the Modern Age

By Richard R. Bell, Elizabeth Goldsmith, Robert Martinez, and Donghyun Lee

The decision to join the military is profoundly influenced by how individuals perceive military service. Recent evidence indicates that young people tend to have a negative

view of the military, and the Department of Defense (DOD) has struggled to effectively communicate with the youth market.¹ DOD faces a critical challenge in recruiting individuals pos-

sessing the necessary qualities and skills to meet the demands of the National Security Strategy, and Stephanie Miller, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Personnel Policy, underscored the severity of this challenge, labeling the recruitment shortfall as an “unprecedented mission gap” that significantly impacts national service.²

Addressing young people’s reluctance to enlist requires a nuanced

Colonel Richard R. Bell, USA, Lieutenant Colonel Elizabeth Goldsmith, USAF, Lieutenant Colonel Robert Martinez, USN, and Lieutenant Colonel Donghyun Lee, Republic of Korea Army, wrote this essay while attending the Joint and Combined Warfighting School at the Joint Forces Staff College. It won the Strategy Article category of the 2024 Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Essay Competitions.



Marine Corps Sergeant Alberto Ochoa, drill instructor with Fox Company, 2nd Recruit Training Battalion, corrects recruit during Table One Course of Fire at Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, California, August 21, 2024 (U.S. Marine Corps/Sarah M. Grawcock)

understanding of the factors influencing their perceptions of military service. The prevalence of misinformation and selective information-sharing on digital platforms decreases young people's willingness to consider military enlistment as a viable career option. DOD's inability to successfully advertise to the youth market is due to several factors: a lack of understanding of Generation Z (individuals born between 1995 and 2004), an inability to collect data due to existing laws, and a stunted view on how to leverage new media. *New media* is broadly defined as interactive and interconnected online communications systems tied mainly to social networking, including platforms such as Facebook, X/Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, blogs, and forums.

This article argues that DOD faces significant obstacles in recruiting due to the way that it communicates with the current youth market. By leveraging new media and social engagements to highlight the benefits of military service, the military could present itself in a more relevant, authentic, and informative manner, ultimately increasing recruitment outcomes. This article explores the difficulties of recruiting the current youth market, discusses current DOD limitations, and provides recommended lines of effort to address service challenges in the new media environment.

Defining the Problem

Young people's views on the military are shaped by a mix of factors, including how the military is portrayed in

the media, personal experiences, and societal discussions. These factors significantly influence the decisionmaking process about whether to enlist. Data on the willingness of young Americans to serve in the military highlights significant concerns regarding military service:³

- 70 percent are deterred by the risk of physical injury or death
- 65 percent are deterred by the potential for post-traumatic stress disorder or other psychological issues
- 58 percent are deterred by the prospect of leaving family and friends
- 46 percent are deterred by having other career interests
- 40 percent are deterred by an aversion to the military lifestyle.

Contrast these concerns with an understanding of Generation Z's existing fears as they transition to the workplace: the rising cost of living, unemployment, mental health, and maintaining a healthy work-life balance. These fears contribute to a pessimistic view of the future among many in this generation, leading to postponed life decisions and a tendency toward frugality. Therefore, it is little wonder that young people do not see military service as a legitimate career option. Notably, the willingness of Generation Z to serve has decreased from 13 percent to 9 percent when compared to Generation X,⁴ and confidence in the U.S. military has fallen from 72 percent in 2020 to 60 percent in 2023.⁵ This decline corresponds with a declining connection between society and Servicemembers.

New media increasingly shows the military as something that exacerbates Generation Z's concerns instead of being an opportunity to join a profession, learn new skills, and earn a competitive salary. The system perpetuates misinformation and stereotypes about the military that appeal to existing cognitive biases. The University of California's Santa Barbara Center for Information Technology and Society reported that misleading or fake stories are believed because they appeal to a shared belief a person already has.⁶ Social media is designed in a way to perpetuate false narratives because the cost of entry is low, credibility is hard to ascertain, and social networks tend to be "ideologically homogenous," with everyone sharing similar beliefs. Social media is shown to have the greatest effect on purchase decisions versus any other platform because of how it facilitates showing the opinions of others in the community, also known as social proof.⁷

DOD's recruitment challenges are largely due to its outdated messaging strategies with the youth market, which is compounded by a generational reduction in military experience and exposure. The challenge is determining if the lack of interest in military service is due to a shift in values and discipline compared to previous generations or if it is a failure of the military Services to adjust their

recruitment strategies to fit a changed societal and technological context.⁸ To bridge this gap, we posit that DOD must tailor its recruitment strategies to address the specific concerns and needs of Generation Z.

Recommendations

The first strategy requires the military to stop talking to itself. Given the apprehensions young people have toward military service, it is crucial for DOD to revamp its messaging to better align with the interests and values of the youth market. Recent Army and Air Force advertisements aimed at Generation Z inadvertently focus on aspects of military life—like the potential for physical injury, psychological strain, and separation from loved ones—that amplify their reservations.⁹

These advertisements often seem more suited to those already serving or inclined toward military service, reflecting a missed opportunity to connect with a broader audience. To appeal more effectively to young people, it is essential to highlight the benefits of military service that matter most to them, such as financial security and education and portraying the military as a route to personal and professional growth, while subtly addressing their concerns about injury, stress, and military life.

Moreover, the use of military jargon and an overemphasis on combat roles can alienate those unfamiliar with the military, failing to draw in young individuals without military connections.¹⁰ Using military terminology and highlighting war create the impression that the target audience is military members who are already serving.

To better connect with young audiences, the Services must reimagine how they build the brand. The goal must be to shift away from traditional images of military personnel to a more holistic view that includes professional, personal, and academic growth. Sharing stories of transformation and resilience could help change the narrative, emphasizing positive aspects and benefits.

Expanding the population of those inclined to serve requires a long-term

nuanced approach. Services must differentiate between misconceptions and legitimate concerns about military service in a trustworthy manner. By doing so, DOD shifts the narrative from the risks to the rewards of service. Authentic storytelling that reflects the desires of young people—for home ownership, education, travel, camaraderie, and the unexpected benefits such as leadership skills and self-confidence—could make the military a more appealing career path. By crafting genuine and targeted messaging, the military could strengthen its brand as an attractive and rewarding career choice.

To boost military awareness and engagement, the military should adopt a show and tell approach, capitalizing on the influence of Servicemembers, veterans, and their various networks. Despite a decline in recommendations for military life, veterans are still much more likely to recommend service to close acquaintances, and those with military connections are significantly more inclined to enlist.¹¹ Therefore, investing in long-term initiatives to reconnect veterans to society should have significant results, expanding opportunities to experience service as well as efforts to connect with influencers such as parents and teachers.

Key initiatives include:

- Enhancing engagement with veterans: partner with the Veterans Administration and veterans' organizations to showcase the diverse achievements of veterans, highlighting the benefits of military service, such as education, competitive pay, and financial stability.¹²
- Implementing military internships and mentorship programs: offer short-term internships and establish mentorship programs to expose youth to military careers and lifestyle, demonstrating the military's role and opportunities in a nontraditional light.¹³
- Strengthening parental and influencer outreach: extend outreach and advertising to parents and educators to cultivate key influencers, leveraging research that shows a strong

correlation between parental attitudes toward the military and their children's likelihood of enlisting.¹⁴

By implementing these strategies, the military could more effectively engage with potential recruits and their influencers, showcasing the varied and rewarding paths military service can offer.

Conclusion

Reduction in the connections between military services and the public, combined with constraints on the Services in communicating via new media, challenge the Services to present military service as an appealing option for today's youth. By updating its use of new media and enhancing social engagements, the military could create and share stories that resonate with young people's interests and concerns, thereby redefining the image of military service for Generation Z.

These focused efforts can shift Generation Z's perspective on service, simultaneously addressing their concerns while showcasing the military as a rewarding career choice. A deep, data-informed comprehension of youth perceptions is crucial to align military recruitment with the values and concerns of the next generation. JFQ

Notes

¹ U.S. Navy, *Recruiting and Retention Efforts in the Defense Department*, Senate Armed Services Committee, 117th Cong., 2nd sess., September 21, 2022, <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/Testimony/display-testimony/Article/3169293/senate-armed-services-hearing-on-the-recruiting-and-retention-efforts-in-the-de/>.

² Mark Crow, Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis, U.S. Military Academy at West Point, telephone interview, February 2, 2024; U.S. Navy, *Recruiting and Retention Efforts in the Defense Department*.

³ "Fall 2022 Propensity Update," Department of Defense Office of People Analytics, August 21, 2023.

⁴ Dontavian Harrison, "Secretary of the Army Christine Wormuth's Remarks to the 2022 AUSA Opening Ceremony," U.S. Army, October 10, 2022, https://www.army.mil/article/260969/secretary_of_the_army_christine_wormuths_remarks_to_the_2022_

[ausa_opening_ceremony_october_10_2022as_prepared](https://www.army.mil/article/260969/secretary_of_the_army_christine_wormuths_remarks_to_the_2022_ausa_opening_ceremony_october_10_2022as_prepared).

⁵ "Confidence in Institutions," Gallup, 2024, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx>.

⁶ "Why We Fall for Fake News," University of California Santa Barbara Center for Information Technology and Society, n.d., <https://cits.ucsb.edu/fake-news/why-we-fall>.

⁷ Shpresa Mehmeti-Bajrami, Fidan Qerimi, and Arbëresha Qerimi, "The Impact of Digital Marketing vs. Traditional Marketing on Consumer Buying Behavior," *HighTech and Innovation Journal* 3, no. 3 (2022), 326–340, <https://www.hightechjournal.org/index.php/HIJ/article/view/296/pdf>.

⁸ Crow, telephone interview.

⁹ Matthew Cox, "Army Launches New 'Warriors Wanted' Campaign Aimed at Generation Z," *Military.com*, October 19, 2018, <https://www.military.com/dodbuzz/2018/10/19/army-launches-new-warriors-wanted-campaign-aimed-generation-z.html>.

¹⁰ "USA Triathlon Partners With Air Force Special Warfare as Official Partner of Excellence," USA Triathlon, February 15, 2024, <https://www.usatriathlon.org/articles/news/usa-triathlon-partners-with-air-force-special-warfare-as-official-partner-of-excellence>; "Pay and Benefits," U.S. Air Force, <https://www.airforce.com/pay-and-benefits>.

¹¹ "Facts and Figures," U.S. Army Recruiting Command, n.d., https://recruiting.army.mil/pao/facts_figures/.

¹² Christine Moorman, Megan Ryan, and Nader Tavassoli, "Why Marketers Are Returning to Traditional Advertising," *Harvard Business Review*, April 29, 2022, <https://hbr.org/2022/04/why-marketers-are-returning-to-traditional-advertising>; Matthew F. Amidon, "Veterans May Be Key to Solving the U.S. Military Recruitment Crisis," *Military Times*, August 23, 2022, <https://www.militarytimes.com/opinion/commentary/2022/08/23/veterans-may-be-key-to-solving-the-us-military-recruitment-crisis/>; Paul Sherbo, "Countering Negative Stereotypes of Veterans," *VA News*, January 11, 2011, <https://news.va.gov/1164/countering-negative-stereotypes-of-veterans>. Veterans are better educated: 89 percent have a high school diploma versus 81.6 percent of the general population, and 25 percent have a bachelor's degree versus 19 percent of the general population. Moreover, veterans are paid 5 percent more than the median population and are less likely to suffer from poverty (5.6 percent versus 10.9 percent for the adult population).

¹³ Charles Eesley and Yanbo Wang, "Social Influence in Career Choice: Evidence From a Randomized Field Experiment on Entrepreneurial Mentorship," *Research Policy* 46, no. 3 (April 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2017.01.010>.

¹⁴ Jennifer Lee Gibson, Brian K. Griepentrog, and Sean M. Marsh, "Parental Influence on Youth Propensity to Join the Military," *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 70, no. 3 (June 2007), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2007.03.002>.