

ATMOSPHERICS

07.26.24

PERSONNEL AND READINESS

U.S. Military & Veteran Network



Bottom Line Up Front:

- The U.S. military faces a multifaceted personnel readiness crisis, with all branches struggling to meet recruitment targets due to a severely limited pool of eligible candidates (only 23% of young adults qualify) and persistent retention issues in critical roles.
- Significant health and wellness challenges are eroding military readiness, with obesity rates among active-duty personnel doubling over the past decade and mental health concerns, including rising suicide rates, becoming increasingly prevalent. These issues not only impact current service members but also further shrink the potential recruitment pool.
- The DoD is leveraging AI, data analytics, and health programs like H2F to improve recruitment, retention, and readiness. Key initiatives, including the Army's Virtual Recruiting Center and comprehensive training strategies like JADC2 and LVC environments, aim to enhance operational efficiency and save up to \$1.6 billion.
- There is growing public concern about the long-term consequences of inadequately addressing personnel and readiness issues.

INFORMATION

In our previous Atmospherics Product, we explored several key pillars contributing to the U.S.'s durable competitive advantage, including its unique 'Military and Veteran Network'. This week, we focus on a subcomponent of that pillar, personnel and readiness, providing a high-level overview of the current state, relevant technological connections, and public sentiment. While there are a multitude of variables which can be measured (and a near-endless amount of research which could be done on each) to assess said 'current state', there are four key areas which arguably have an out-weighted impact: the recruitment, retention, health, and wellness of service members. Even by broadly examining these fundamental aspects, we can gain insights into the challenges and opportunities facing the U.S. military today.

Recruitment has been particularly challenging. In fiscal year 2023, the Army fell short of its recruitment goal by 10,000 soldiers, achieving only 55,000 of the 65,000 target. The Navy and Air Force also missed their goals, reaching only 80% and 89% of their targets, respectively. These shortfalls are largely attributed to a shrinking pool of eligible candidates. Approximately 77% of young adults in the U.S. are unqualified for military service due to obesity, drug use, health problems, and criminal records. This situation is exacerbated by a lack of awareness about military service.

Retention is another critical issue. The Air Force has consistently struggled to retain pilots since 2013, falling short by nearly 2,700 airmen in fiscal year 2023 despite financial incentives. The Navy also faces retention challenges, particularly among its enlisted leaders and aviators. Health and wellness issues further impact readiness. Obesity rates among active-duty service members have doubled over the past decade, reaching 21.6% in 2022. This mirrors national trends and has significantly shrunk the recruitment pool. The Navy has the highest prevalence, with nearly 22% of sailors classified as obese. Obesity contributes to various health issues, including musculoskeletal injuries (MSIs), which are prevalent throughout military careers and impact overall readiness.

Mental health remains a critical concern. In 2022, the active component suicide rate increased slightly to 331 deaths, up from 328 in 2021. Suicide rates among active-duty service members have been rising since 2011, reflecting broader U.S. population trends. The Department of Defense (DoD) is working to improve mental health care accessibility and reduce stigma, with efforts to hire 2,000 new mental health care professionals underway.

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach. The U.S. military must implement targeted recruitment strategies, enhanced retention programs, and robust health and wellness initiatives. The DoD must prioritize service members' well-being and invest in modernizing the force to ensure long-term national security. By tackling the root causes of recruitment shortfalls, retention issues, and health concerns, the U.S. military can enhance its readiness and resilience in the face of evolving global threats.

TECHNOLOGY



The Department of Defense (DoD) is actively leveraging advanced technologies to address personnel and readiness challenges. Recent initiatives and strategies demonstrate a concerted effort to integrate artificial intelligence (AI), data analytics, and other innovative solutions across various aspects of military operations.

AI and Data Integration: In November 2023, the DoD released its Data, Analytics, and Artificial Intelligence Adoption Strategy, emphasizing the critical role of AI in enhancing decision-making and operational capabilities. This strategy aims to create a unified data ecosystem, improve data management, and remove policy barriers to facilitate widespread AI adoption across all DoD components. The Chief Digital and AI Office (CDAO), established in June 2022, has taken a leading role in this effort by consolidating functions previously handled by the Joint Artificial Intelligence Center (JAIC), the Defense Digital Service (DDS), and the Office of Advancing Analytics (ADVANA). A key initiative under the CDAO is the Data Readiness for AI Development (DRAID) vehicle, focusing on ensuring quality data for AI system development with a \$241 million budget ceiling.

Recruitment and Retention: The Army's Virtual Recruiting Center (VRC) modernizes recruitment strategies, particularly in response to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The VRC heavily utilizes social media platforms to engage potential recruits. Despite these advancements, the Army faced significant recruitment challenges in 2022 and 2023. However, innovative programs like the Future Soldier Preparatory Course have shown promise, with 75% of participants successfully improving their ASVAB scores and meeting physical standards.

Health and Wellness: The Army's Holistic Health and Fitness (H2F) program has demonstrated significant positive outcomes. Early data shows a 37% reduction in suicides in H2F units compared to a 37% increase in non-H2F units. Additionally, H2F units saw a 49% drop in behavioral health referrals and a 52% reduction in musculoskeletal injuries. The program's success has led to plans for accelerated implementation, aiming to equip 110 brigades with H2F resources by 2030, generating cost savings between \$1.4 and \$1.6 billion by reducing retraining needs and lowering injury rates.

Implementation and Training: The DoD emphasizes comprehensive training strategies, including the Joint All Domain Command and Control (JADC2) initiative, which integrates sensors and shooters across all domains. Live, Virtual, and Constructive (LVC) training environments create realistic, cost-efficient scenarios. The Software Modernization Implementation Plan focuses on delivering resilient software capabilities, while the Cyber Workforce Strategy aims to build an agile, capable cyber workforce.

Cost and Efficiency: The H2F program is projected to save the Army between \$1.4 and \$1.6 billion by 2030 through reduced retraining costs and lower medical expenses. The Defense Innovation Unit (DIU) has successfully transitioned 17 commercial solutions to DoD users in FY22, significantly speeding up the adoption process and reducing costs.

SENTIMENT

Views on military personnel and readiness are diverse and often complex, ranging from high respect for service members to concerns about militarism. However, there's a growing public concern about the long-term consequences of inadequately addressing personnel and readiness issues, especially in the U.S. military. This concern spans several key areas:

Training and Education: While many people respect the dedication of military personnel, there's worry that current training programs are underfunded. This could lead to subpar instruction for future service members, compromising their preparation and overall readiness.

Recruitment and Retention: There's an ongoing debate about the challenges of recruiting and retaining qualified personnel. Inadequate support may exacerbate these issues, making it harder to attract high-caliber candidates and potentially leading to shortages in qualified personnel.

Health and Wellness: The public and policymakers alike are concerned about insufficient funding for healthcare and mental health services. This could result in delayed or inadequate treatment for both physical and psychological ailments, adversely impacting the overall health and well-being of current and future service members.

Strategic Planning and Adaptability: Experts worry that budget constraints may leave the military less equipped to respond to emerging threats or crises. This ties into broader debates about military modernization and the balance between traditional capabilities and emerging needs in areas like cybersecurity.

International Collaboration: There's recognition that inadequate support for collaboration efforts with allies and partners could hamper future multinational operations. This relates to discussions about the role of military forces in international interventions and peacekeeping.

Budget Considerations: The impact of persistent budget constraints on readiness initiatives is a significant concern. This ties into broader debates about military spending, with some advocating for increased defense budgets while others push for more focus on non-military approaches to international issues.

Social and Economic Impacts: While some focus on the economic impact of military bases on local communities, others are increasingly concerned about the social challenges faced by military families, both now and in the future.

These concerns reflect a nuanced public sentiment that while generally respectful of military personnel, is increasingly worried about the long-term implications of current readiness issues. The debate continues on how to balance these concerns with other national priorities and differing views on the role of the military in society.

REFERENCES:

1. Neptune Advisory. "Personnel & Readiness - May 2020 - FINAL." May 2020.
2. "Atmospherics Product 2.0_20231027_MILITARY_PERSONNEL_AND_READINESS." October 27, 2023.
3. <https://militarywellness.org> "member comments."
4. U.S. Army Recruiting Command. "Facts & Figures."
5. U.S. Department of Defense. "DoD Addresses Recruiting Shortfall Challenges."
6. Federal News Network. "Army plans major changes to recruiting after falling short of 2023 goals." October 2023.
7. Health.mil. "Hospitalization Burden." June 1, 2023.
8. RAND Corporation. "Military Health and Health Care."
9. Roll Call. "Military obesity rates soar, compounding recruitment challenges." October 18, 2023.
10. Defense Suicide Prevention Office. "Quarterly Suicide Report (QSR) 1st Quarter, CY 2023." June 23, 2023.
11. Defense Suicide Prevention Office. "Annual Report on Suicide in the Military: Calendar Year 2022."
12. U.S. Department of Defense. "Department of Defense Releases Annual Report on Suicide in the Military - Calendar Year 2022."
13. Wolfram|Alpha. "US military personnel readiness current state 2022 2023 with updated statistics."
14. USAFacts. "Is military enlistment down?"
15. NBC News. "Every branch of U.S. military is struggling to meet 2022 recruiting goals, officials say."
16. Health.mil. "MSMR RMEs." December 1, 2023.
17. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. "Suicide Prevention Data."
18. Military.com. "Overall Military Suicide Rate Dropped, but Active-Duty Deaths Increased Slightly, Pentagon Reports." October 26, 2023.
19. U.S. Department of Defense. "DOD Releases AI Adoption Strategy." November 2, 2023.
20. U.S. Department of Defense. "DOD Modernization Relies on Rapidly Leveraging Commercial Technology." January 25, 2023.
21. U.S. Army Center for Initial Military Training. "Holistic Health and Fitness - Soldier Readiness System." September 30, 2021.
22. Steve Beynon. "Army Quickly Expanding Holistic Health and Fitness Teams Following Promising Early Results." 2023.
23. Hunter Rhoades. "Momentum Builds as Army Implements Holistic Health and Fitness." 2023.
24. Todd South. "Early Data Shows 37% Suicide Decrease in Units with Holistic Health." April 26, 2023.
25. Breaking Defense. "What DoD Needs to Make JADC2 a Reality is Live, Virtual, and Constructive." 2022.
26. McKinsey & Company. "US DoD Budget and Defense Technology Innovation." November 4, 2022.

