

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

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1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 05/10/2019	2. REPORT TYPE Master's of Military Studies	3. DATES COVERED (From - To) SEP 2018 - APR 2019
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4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Overcoming the Opportunity Cost to Readiness in Recruiting Teenage Enlistees into an All-Volunteer Force	5a. CONTRACT NUMBER N/A
	5b. GRANT NUMBER N/A
	5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER N/A

6. AUTHOR(S) Hicks, Joseph, C, Major, USA	5d. PROJECT NUMBER N/A
	5e. TASK NUMBER N/A
	5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER N/A

7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) USMC Command and Staff College Marine Corps University 2076 South Street Quantico, VA 22134-5068	8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER N/A
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9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)	10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S) Dr. Bradford Wineman
	11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S) N/A

12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Approved for public release, distribution unlimited.

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

14. ABSTRACT
The active recruitment of American teenagers for military service before they enter optional post-secondary education or the civilian workforce brings with it an opportunity cost to unit readiness and command distraction that manifests itself in petty UCMJ violations, resiliency-rooted behavioral health issues, and responsibility challenges. To better account for the diverging character and expectations placed on American youth and the later transition to adulthood, the Department of Defense should implement a gradual statutory change in the minimum age to enlist from 18 to 20 years old over a five-year phase in period.

15. SUBJECT TERMS
Readiness; Recruitment; Resiliency; Civil-Military Relations; UCMJ; Behavioral Health; Opportunity Cost.

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT	b. ABSTRACT	c. THIS PAGE			USMC Command and Staff College
Unclass	Unclass	Unclass	UU	42	19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (Include area code) (703) 784-3330 (Admin Office)

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Command and Staff College
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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

TITLE:

**Overcoming the Opportunity Cost to Readiness in Recruiting
Teenage Enlistees into an All-Volunteer Force**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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AY 2018-19

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Approved: 

Date: 10 May 2019

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Date: 10 May 2019

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Executive Summary

Title: Overcoming the Opportunity Cost to Readiness in Recruiting Teenage Enlistees into an All-Volunteer Force

Author: Major Joseph Hicks, United States Army

Thesis: The active recruitment of American teenagers for military service before they enter optional post-secondary education or the civilian workforce brings with it an opportunity cost to unit readiness and command distraction that manifests itself in petty UCMJ violations, resiliency-rooted behavioral health issues, and responsibility challenges. To better account for the diverging character and expectations placed on American youth and the later transition to adulthood, the Department of Defense should implement a gradual statutory change in the minimum age to enlist from 18 to 20 years old over a five-year phase in period.

Discussion: Emerging literature on trends and characteristics within Generation Z does not provide the depth of analysis needed for pinpointed Department of Defense policy updates accounting for generational norms, but initial indications show that policy updates targeted at narrowing the expectation-capability gap that is widening in the Millennial generation will continue having positive effects on integrating Generation Z into military service.

Current analysis of behavior normalizing trends in both American society and the military indicate two key trends. The first trend is that societal and military conditions continue to shift away from those conditions present at the formation of the all-volunteer force in 1973. In society, these trends include all key age-related indicators of the transition to adulthood moving older. In the military, these trends include the increased complexity of combat at lower echelons focused at the team and squad level and the increased expectation for critical thinking and independent decision making of junior enlisted leaders.

The second trend is that societal and military expectations for American teenagers are diverging from each other. American society and the political institutions that represent it are cultivating teenage indicators of delayed maturity into adulthood and signaling their tacit acceptance of this trend while the military is increasing its expectations on teenage enlistees to identify and adapt to increasingly complex problems and small unit leadership challenges. This double divergence of military expectations away from both historical norms and evolving societal expectations places increasing physical and psychological stresses on teenage enlistees that manifest in direct impacts to unit readiness.

Conclusion: The Department of Defense continues to demographically better represent a cross section of society, however, inclusivity of people without an existing connection to the military remains low. As war becomes more complex, the stresses and demands on younger Soldiers are increasing, and the intellectual maturity of 18-year-olds cannot keep up. The gradual and phased statutory change in the minimum age from 18 to 20 years old represents many challenges to the prospect of maintaining an all-volunteer force in a time when the available percentage of the American population who meet the basic requirements for service continues to shrink. None of these challenges represent an insurmountable obstacle though, and the Department of Defense can feasibly implement this change resulting in higher quality, lower turnover, and a more resilient force capable of meeting the demands of the nation it serves.

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Preface

Leaders throughout the United States military's all volunteer force understand that the enduring asymmetrical advantage that we have over our peer adversaries is our people. As a former company commander, I am keenly aware of the opportunity cost in terms of unit readiness, leader focus, and resources associated with the targeted recruitment of American teenagers to fill the American military's ranks. The character and expectations of military service continue to evolve and diverge from the character and expectations of generational youths, and I experienced firsthand the effects of the growing capability-expectation gap.

My goals are threefold with the submission of this project: First, educate leaders of the quantifiable opportunity costs associated with the military's target recruitment population. The military historically expresses unreasonable fears associated with large policy changes, that ultimately do not materialize. Second, propose a gradual statutory shift in the minimum age for enlistment from 18 to 20 years old. Lastly, begin evaluating the second order effects that make this proposal superficially unpalatable. My goal is not to condemn any specific generation or demographic within the military, nor is it my intention to recommend an instantaneous upheaval of the conscription and recruiting standards in place for the past 200 years. There is a growing problem in the military that is manifesting itself in ways that currently require personnel management policies to mitigate impacts to deploying units at the expense of all others, but the military has the time to evaluate and implement changes now.

I appreciate the feedback, and thoughtful discussions from MAJ Gregg Curley and 1SG Neil Roselli. They provided valuable insights into many of the facets of this issue stemming from their legal expertise and direct experience as a recruiter, respectively. I appreciate the candid feedback and constructive skepticism from LTC Gregory Sand who consistently challenged my assertions. Lastly, I genuinely appreciate the patience, academic encouragement, and creative rudder steers from my mentor, Dr. Bradford Wineman.

INTRODUCTION

As the All-Volunteer Force (AVF) approaches its fiftieth year of implementation as the American service system of choice, questions surrounding the viability of the system that relies entirely on recruited Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, and Marines without the prospect of conscription give way to questions of how the AVF will continue to adapt and stay effective in the changing American social landscape. The Department of Defense will spend 23% of its fiscal year 2019 budget on military personnel costs which is over \$152B in taxpayer dollars.¹ This dollar amount and percentage of the budget reinforces the point articulated in the *Summary of the 2018 National Defense of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge* that the military's personnel, and in particular their creativity and talent, provide the single greatest enduring advantage over peer competitors and international threats to the American public.² This financial investment and reinforced focus within top tier policy documents in the DoD on maintaining the quality and capabilities of the current force structure implies a willingness to implement significant, department-wide changes to maintain relevant personnel policies. However, as William Taylor highlights through four key examples in *Military Service and American Democracy: From World War II to the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars*, the DoD consistently resists change relative to emerging American societal norms and applies incorrect assumptions leading to this resistance.³

The active recruitment of American teenagers for military service before they enter optional post-secondary education or the civilian workforce brings with it an opportunity cost to unit readiness that manifests itself in petty Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) violations, resiliency-rooted behavioral health issues, and challenges in responding to the stresses of increasing responsibility.⁴ To better account for the diverging character and expectations placed

on American youth and the later transition to adulthood, the Department of Defense (DoD) should implement a gradual statutory change in the minimum age to enlist from 18 to 20 years old. During the time necessary to legislate the change in the United States Code, the Department of Defense should institute department-wide policies updating recruiting, retention, and training practices to account for the drastically increased expectations placed on individual Soldiers in post-9/11 era combat and the generational changes in the character of American youth from Generation X to the introduction of Generation Z enlistees. Debate exists within academic and policy institutions as to the bracketing and definitions of generational labels applied in American society. For continuity within this proposal, the following generational definitions apply:

Generation X applies to those born between 1964 to 1980;⁵ Generation Y (the label Millennial is also applicable) applies to those born between 1981 to 1996;⁶ and Generation Z applies to those born between 1997 to 2015.⁷ Eight sources provided the initial date ranges for each generational label that were then reconciled for this proposal. Cuspers, people born on the cusp of two significant generations and bearing mixed social indicators as a result, are significant to this proposal in that those corresponding populations bridge statistical trends between generations.

A series of opportunity costs are associated with recruiting and indoctrinating any new set of military servicemembers to replace the voluntary and involuntary personnel turnover and fluctuating troop levels within the military. Current impacts to force readiness, however, are more heavily concentrated in the 18-22 age demographic who enlisted prior to 20 years old.⁸ These costs are quantifiable in many instances and qualitative in others, but all of the opportunity costs associated with the 18 to 20-year-old demographic tie back to unit readiness and command distraction. The first attributable risk to focusing recruiting efforts on the 18 to 20-year-old enlistee population is the occurrence of maturity-related UCMJ violations typically adjudicated

below the threshold of a Summary Courts-Martial.⁹ This demographic holds a disproportionately high concentration of non-judicial punishment as compared to other age demographics across all services.¹⁰ These UCMJ violations include alcohol and drug related misconduct, absent without leave (AWOL), failure to report, and driving under the influence. The figures in table 1.1 show the volume of non-judicial punishment carried out across all of the military services. Not reflected is the amount of time that the prosecuted servicemembers spend administratively non-deployable; the amount of time that unit leadership spends investigating, adjudicating, enforcing punishment, and rehabilitating each servicemember; and the legal resources used in evaluating and processing each case.

Table 1.1
Non-judicial Punishment by Service and Age

Service	FY 14		FY 15		FY 16		FY 17	
	Number of NJP	% in 18-20	Number of NJP	% in 18-20	Number of NJP	% in 18-20	Number of NJP	% in 18-20
Navy / Marines	13,307	26	13,042	25	8,921	17	11,192	21
Air Force	5,256	16	4,516	17	3,954	19	3,896	14
Army	31,689	42	33,708	48	29,707	42	26,638	45

Source: Data compiled from United States Court of Appeals for the Armed Forces. Code Committee.

Annual Report Submitted to the Committees on Armed Services of the United States Senate and United States House of Representatives. 2014-2017.

The second significant cost of recruiting teenagers that can be mitigated through reshaping the age demographics of initial entry onto active military service is resiliency-rooted behavioral health complaints tied primarily to suicidal ideations or attempts and PTSD. The same population of servicemembers who enlisted at 20 years old or younger and holds a disproportionate number of maturity related UCMJ violations also holds a disproportional portion of resiliency-rooted behavioral health diagnoses.¹¹ There is a growing divergence

between societal norms and expectations placed on American teenagers and military norms and expectations. This divergence is placing teenagers in combat situations where they are expected to provide capabilities and mental resilience that society has not helped them mature into.

A harder-to-quantify opportunity cost associated with targeting teenagers for recruitment into the military is involuntary attrition and command distraction. No data exists for the disproportionate amount of time spent within commands mitigating the ramifications of the capability-expectation gap, however, the commonality of terms such as “The 90/10 Rule,” the “10 Percent Rule,” and “Bad Apple Tax” within the military lexicon show the general acceptance and prevalence of the issue. The feedback loop from recruitment to initial entry training to operational forces terminates with the arrival of the enlistee at his or her duty assignment and fails to provide useable metrics and information on quality control to the military recruiters responsible for identifying and recruiting talent. This feedback gap places the opportunity costs tied to recruitment squarely on operational commands without a method to influence the target audience.

The historical precedent establishing 18 as the minimum age to enlist in the military holds a tenuous connection to the legal age of adulthood (can enter into a contract) and the end of compulsory secondary education. There is also a civic connection between suffrage and military service. If American society expects an 18-year-old to vote and participate in the democratic process, then there is also an expectation of service. There is no state or federal statute, legal precedent, medical justification, or international norm preventing Congress from updating the minimum age as part of a future National Defense Authorization Act. The minimum age for military service continues to uphold the established minimum age guidelines first seen in the second Militia Act of 1792¹² and continued through the draft parameters of the Selective Service

Act of 1917.¹³ Title 10 USC establishes the legal statute for the age parameters with the minimum age not updated since the founding of the republic and well prior to the establishment of the all-volunteer force in 1973.¹⁴ The only age parameter that saw any attention and adjustment is the maximum age allowed for initial entry into military service. The federal age restriction for enlistment onto any active service was adjusted from 35 years old to 42 years old in the fiscal year 2006 NDAA.¹⁵ The service secretaries have the collective authority to impose tighter restrictions than the federal law, and thus have the statutory ability to also impose a tighter restriction on the minimum age to enlist until Congress legislates a permanent change to the law.

The minimum age for military service has no international legal precedent and a tenuous norm among volunteer and conscript militaries. Ages range from 17 years old in countries such as Germany, Saudi Arabia, and the Philippines to 20 years old in Japan, Ukraine, and Morocco.¹⁶ Countries with lower average population ages, such as Nigeria and other African countries, also tended to have low military entry ages. This trend towards lower military entry ages also appears when looking at states with heterogeneous cultures while states with homogenous cultures showed no definitive trend.¹⁷ The minimum age is also not consistent with other federal or state minimum age requirements such as: the minimum age to legally drink is 21;¹⁸ the minimum age to obtain a full driver's license varies by state from 16.5 to 18;¹⁹ the minimum age to legally purchase tobacco products varies by state from 18 to 21;²⁰ the minimum age to legally possess a handgun varies by state from 18 to 21.²¹ Every age restricted reference previously mentioned with a range of years by state is currently trending towards the higher minimum requirement thus restricting more activities that 18-year-olds are legally allowed to do in more states. American society is sending a message through its elected officials and legislators that teenagers do not

have the maturity required to self-regulate dangerous activities. The decision to join the military at 18 years old and become a manager of state-sponsored violence as a member of the profession of arms represents an equally, if not more, dangerous activity than buying tobacco products or alcohol.

The minimum age for enlistment is also not tied to physical or psychological development or maturity. Consensus studies place male psychological maturity at 24 years old and physical peak maturity at 30 years old.²² With initial enlistment contracts varying both within and among the different services between two and six years, an 18-year-old male enlistee would reach the end of his contractual obligation prior to reaching either peak physical or psychological maturity. The military services require that enlistee who has not reached physical or psychological maturity and potentially cannot buy alcohol, tobacco, or handguns in his home state to critically think and direct appropriate deadly force against thinking and adapting enemy combatants. There is an expectation of both lethality and discretion, inherently knowing when not to apply deadly force, placed on junior servicemembers by the same military institution that cannot train the cultural context of their social upbringing out of them.

If the upper limit for entry into the military services changed based on an updated understanding of physical and mental viability of late entry servicemembers and an increased need, then the same is possible for adjusting the minimum. Precedents exist at both the state and federal levels of government for restricting access to products and privileges based on the behavioral norms of an age group within a generation. The trends with respect to Millennials and subsequently upcoming members of Generation Z, based on the statistics supported by Millennial cuspers, are to increase age requirements to account for the repercussions associated with delayed ascendance into adulthood. If the quantifiable opportunity costs exist, legislative

precedents exist, and an opportunity to make needed changes exist then military policy makers and ultimately legislators need to understand the environmental changes, generational social changes, military changes, and benefits to actively addressing these costs.

ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL CHANGES

The environmental and social conditions in American have undergone significant changes since the transition to the AVF in 1973. In almost every measurable metric related to the socially normalized transition from adolescence to adulthood, the ages and percentages are gradually, yet steadily, trending higher. Life expectancy for both genders have risen more than seven years between 1973 and 2018. As a male-female aggregate, the life expectancy went from 71.3 years in 1973 to 78.6 years in 2018.²³ This increase in life expectancy shifts the necessity of transitioning to conventional ideas of adult activities and conditions to later in a person's life because Americans have more time. The percentage of American teenagers attending college has increased from 1973 to 2017 thus also advancing the age of entry into the professional workforce. The percentage of teenagers transitioning directly from high school into a degree-producing, post-secondary institution went from 46.6% in 1973 to 66.7% in 2017.²⁴

Environmental metrics tied to familial independence are also significantly trending towards an older transition to adulthood. The average age of adults at the time of their first marriage has increased from age 23.2 for men and 21.0 for women in 1973 to age 29.8 for men and 27.8 for women in 2018.²⁵ Also, the average age of adults at the birth of their first child has increased from 27.4 for men in 1973 to 30.4 for men in 2015.²⁶ The percentage of young adults aged 18 to 24 years old still living with their parents raised from 26% in 1975 to 31.6% in 2015.²⁷ More young adult Millennials live in their parents' homes than under any other living

arrangement.²⁸ This living arrangement not only demonstrates prolonged familial dependence but also indicates delayed financial freedom with the financial security of the young adult still intertwined with their parents. The concentration of young adults still living with parents coupled with previously cited trending age increases in legally controlled activities shows society's willingness to accept and accommodate this delayed transition to adulthood. These environmental metrics show that Millennials and members of Generation Z are not only going to live longer than previous generations, but that they also are knowingly delaying the activities typically associated with a transition to adulthood with tacit acceptance from society. The societal acceptance of these trends moving forward means that the military must then absorb the costs and risks associated with indoctrinating a population wholly unprepared for an institution with expectations unchanged in two generations.

The societal and military expectations of an 18-year-old at the establishment of the AVF not only differ greatly from expectations developed in the post 9/11 era through 18 years of continuous fighting in the Middle East but increasingly differ from each other. American society and the political institutions that represent it are cultivating teenage indicators of delayed maturity into adulthood and signaling their tacit acceptance of this trend while the military is increasing its expectations on teenage enlistees to identify and adapt to increasing complex problems and small unit leadership challenges. As an example, the previously mentioned societal expectation for adolescents transitioning to adulthood to desire independence from nuclear family and display that desire by finding alternative living arrangements has decreased steadily.²⁹ This comes as a direct contrast with military service that often times places service members on different coasts or even continents than their nuclear families and thus introduces an expectation for independence that society no longer normalizes. This divergence between military and

societal expectations shows that while society expects less from its 18-year-olds the military demands more. The way to reconcile this growing difference is by maintaining the emerging expectations of the military but applying them to the appropriate age group within society. Increasing the minimum age for enlisting into the military by two years not only allows American teenagers to biologically mature, but it allows society to culturally mature these potential servicemembers to the appropriate point needed for military training achieve meaningful effect.

One notable exception to the modern divergence of military and societal expectations of American teenagers comes in the form of education and critical thinking amongst junior enlisted leaders. The military prized and cultivated steady obedience in enlisted service members through repetitive and unthought-provoking training and drills tying back to concepts employed by Frederick the Great. The emphasis on obedience lent itself to an initial entry population of independent, non-degree holding enlistees ready to be trained and molded into a professional who can act on muscle memory without applied critical thought. Society generally supported these expectations as demonstrated by the lower percentage of the populations attending college after high school graduation.³⁰ In this way, military and societal expectations complemented each other at the inception of the AVF, providing a young blue-collar workforce that the military capitalized on.

The growing complexity of war in the post-9/11 era includes incorporating weapons and technology suites at increasingly lower echelons. Now, the military demands critical thinkers down to the lowest possible individuals who are able to problem-solve under harsh stressors. Military enlistment resembles the popular image of a blue-collar job much less in 2019 than in 1973 and will eventually completely dislodge from the label. Military service more closely

resembles a specialized profession requiring highly competent individuals employing highly technical skills capable of making decisions with direct life-or-death repercussions. The title of military professional, once held exclusively by the officer corps, extends more and more to senior and junior enlisted servicemembers. No other professions that are outside the sphere requiring specialized selection and training place the same level of physical and psychological strain on American teenagers. The increase in American teenagers electing to immediately continue their education after high school graduation³¹ indicates that society also supports the increased expectation for critically thinking youth who rely more on critical thinking than blind obedience. Obedience as a concept in the military continues changing from servicemembers acting as automatons to servicemembers executing disciplined initiative.

The military was not a cross section of society at the inception of the AVF in America.³² However, the military continues to undergo policy changes driven by political stakeholders that mirror emerging societal norms. The establishment of the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, Don’t Pursue” policy under the Clinton administration and subsequent repeal and allowance of openly homosexual servicemembers under the Obama administration demonstrate this fact. As a second example, the opening of all branches and jobs within the military to women shows that there is precedent within the lifetime of the AVF for the military to undergo monumental changes to greater reflect societal norms and expectations. Since there is a demonstrated desire for the military to represent society when pay/housing/medical costs are removed from the equation, the case then stands for age-adjusting military accessions to also realign military and societal expectations.

Whereas the focus of the qualitative information within this recommendation lies squarely within the Millennial generation, the AVF faces the prospect of falling two generations

behind with the introduction of Generation Z into the ranks. This generation emerged within society as the third defined generation eligible for service since the inception of the AVF. The military is now faced with the challenges of incorporating Generation Z into the military profession without having made the requisite adjustments in policy to maximize the effectiveness of the previous generation. The diverging trend of personal characteristics, traits, and values witnessed between Generation X and Millennials continues with renewed vigor in Generation Z.³³ Societal expectations of an 18-year-old born at the turn of the 21st century run almost entirely counter to that of an 18-year-old in 1973 or earlier.³⁴ This means that the recruiting, training, employment, and retention practices that worked at the advent of the AVF must now jump a full two generations forward. The recruiting commands of each service, while facing the numerical challenge of meeting annual recruiting goals, does not have the opportunity to allow its recruiting methods and target audience to fall an additional generation behind. While analyzing and developing policy-based solutions to meeting the recruiting needs of each military service, the recruiting commands have the opportunity to adjust to the real social and cultural changes occurring from generation to generation in America.

The strategies and tactics employed in each subsequent conflict since the American Revolution continue to evolve along with the servicemembers required to employ them. What were acceptable practices of training and employment of servicemembers as recently as the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq continue to bear the costs of recruiting civilians not yet mature enough to handle the training and combat demands placed on them. More training concessions exist in the initial entry training pipeline due to the social divergences with American society, however, training does not address the core issue that the trainees are not culturally mature enough for service.

MILITARY BENEFITS

The military benefits of providing entry into the service at 20 ties directly into increased unit readiness, decreased command distraction, and an improved foundation upon which to lay ever increasing responsibility. The physically demanding nature of combat requires a more physically and mentally resilient population to endure it and entry at 20 or beyond puts people closer to their peak physical and mental maturity.³⁵ The physicality of jobs within the military certainly existed before the AVF and continue to endure today. The military's understanding of the medical ramifications, however, continues to evolve and grow with the continued innovation and study of human performance.³⁶ The increase in number of servicemembers limited either temporarily or permanently by medical documentation of illness and injury speaks to the evolution of military medicine. Bringing in an initial entry population closer to its peak physical and psychological maturity allows them to train to established standards with less risk of injury. The increased maturity also leads to better risk-based decisions in the execution of training and combat.³⁷ This directly impacts the medical readiness of a unit and allows a commander to deploy with more of her or his assigned servicemembers.

A second benefit of increasing the minimum age of the target recruitment population is a more responsive population with a higher initial threshold for critical thinking and maturity. The time spent by units conducting mandatory training on preventing sexual harassment, providing equal opportunities, reporting drug or alcohol abuse, and avoiding bullying, while remaining necessary for good order and discipline, can refocus toward molding existing morals and ethics instead of trying to instill them in the first place. Capitalizing on more efficient and effective mandatory training provides opportunities for targeted training more easily related to specific specialties thus improving the professionalism and expertise of first-term enlistees.

Two more directly quantifiable areas contributing to higher unit readiness and less command distraction begin with the reduction of the population contributing the greatest number of reported behavioral health ailments linked to suicidal ideations stemming from PTSD, anxiety and depression.³⁸ As mentioned earlier, the stresses placed on members of the military in combat and intensive direct-action training environments continue to exceed the capacity of young servicemembers to process them. The Deployment Health Clinical Center, a Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury Center, released a study in January 2017 that tracked the demographics of diagnosed mental health disorders among active duty service members across all services.³⁹ The study showed that diagnosed mental health disorders, defined as a diagnosis from a medical professional during an inpatient stay or an outpatient visit to a treatment facility, rose across all branches of service from 12.2% of servicemembers in 2005 to 20.1% in 2016.⁴⁰ The most drastic increases occurred in the Army and Marine Corps which almost doubled from 14.2% and 8.4% in 2005 to 26.4% and 14.5% in 2016 respectively.⁴¹ Two additional mental health trends relating back to the combination of a widening expectation-capability gap between the military and the teenagers it recruits are the increase in diagnosed anxiety and PTSD occurrences across all services. The percentage of anxiety disorder diagnoses more than doubled from under 2% in 2005 to more than 5% in 2016, and the percentage of anxiety related diagnoses also more than doubled in the same time period with the Army and Marine Corps again bearing the greatest burden with disproportionately higher percentages.⁴²

The resiliency training programs within the military are limited by the initial foundation of instilled maturity within the individuals participating in training. By aligning comparable expectations from the military with the normalized expectations of society through an updated

recruitment policy targeting the appropriate age demographic, the military can begin to narrow the expectation-capability gap that is the root issue. The narrowing of this gap can lead to a reduction in medical unavailability for behavioral health reasons of active duty service members by removing one of the greatest stressors applied to service members.⁴³ The resiliency curriculum taught to servicemembers will act in concert with the more mature demographic and have a better chance of building tangible coping mechanisms. Placing teenagers in combat situations where the psychological stressors and military requirements outstrip their socially developed maturity and capacity. A potential secondary military benefit is the longer-term reduction in prolonged behavioral health care, both during and after military service, due to unreconciled combat stress.⁴⁴ No data currently exists to model this, however, establishing effective coping mechanisms in an incrementally more mature service population to counteract the extreme stressors of complex combat operations stands up to a surface investigation for validity. These behavioral health resources, once a part of the opportunity cost for maintaining an AVF primarily recruiting teenagers, can then be recapitalized to provide more nuanced and necessary care for servicemembers and veterans.

The Special Operations Forces (SOF) represent specially selected and trained units within the military that apply strict selection criteria and psychological screening prior to entry. When evaluated for incidences of PTSD in 2012, all SOF units studied scored high enough utilizing the PTSD Checklist-Military to indicate positive diagnoses.⁴⁵ This study showed that not only did the combat arms servicemembers score higher than their service support unit partners, but the units studied indicated rates of PTSD at 16%.⁴⁶ This occurrence rate is almost double the rate of conventional use military units.⁴⁷ Considering the screening criteria and training methodology of SOF units coupled with the current operational requirements creating increased physical and

psychological stress on servicemembers, training and access to behavioral health resources cannot close the gap between social preparation and military expectations.

In addition, this recommendation reduces the population contributing the greatest number of reported discipline related UCMJ infractions. As shown in Table 1.1, the demographic of servicemembers who enlisted younger than 20 years old disproportionately hold the concentration of discipline and maturity related UCMJ infractions below the threshold of a summary court-martial.⁴⁸ By removing this demographic from the population of military servicemembers and targeting recruitment of individuals who have added social development either through post-secondary education or employment, the benefit will be realized through the overall reduction of these UCMJ adjudications. With the phasing out of one demographic, the concentration of UCMJ offenses will center on another age group or aggregate population, but the number of actual punished infractions relative to the size of the service should trend downward until stabilizing at a lower level. This reduces the amount of time and attention unit leaders at every echelon must spend investigating, adjudicating, and supervising punishment for infraction freeing them to more evenly focus attention across formations. This also reduces the amount of time that individual servicemembers remain administratively non-deployable or functionally restricted from performing certain tasks inherent to their job for lack of access.

Not as easily quantified is the impact of reducing punishable UCMJ and policy infractions on unit cohesion and morale. The trust and confidence of a servicemember in his or her leaders can easily strain when the leaders become preoccupied or overwhelmed with legal and administrative actions. The witnessed effects of imposed punishments, even rehabilitative in nature, can impact the culture and cohesion of a unit in an expressly negative way.

RECOMMENDED CHANGES IN POLICY

The recommendation of adjusting the minimum age of enlistment from 17 with a parental waiver to 20 without an age waiver lies at the core of this argument, however, the recommended age change requires gradual, phased implementation with careful evaluation and complimentary policy changes at the DoD and service levels. The following proposal is an example implementation plan that seeks to achieve stable change while mitigating the potential issues associated with severe demographic adjustment. The recommended policy change and all accompanying recommendations do not have a specific time horizon for implementation, however, the longer the DoD waits to begin implementation the more severe the opportunity costs of recruiting teenagers into the military will become.

The DoD should tie initial implementation to the beginning of a fiscal year at least five years from the decision date, allowing the services five years to analyze perceived impacts and adjust budget proposals for the first year. At the beginning of the first fiscal year, the DoD should eliminate all parental waivers in each service for 17-year-old enlistees. Any waived contracts signed before the implementation date should be “grandfathered” to maintain good faith. In conjunction with eliminating all parental waivers, each service should pilot an expanded Delayed Entry Program (DEP) to begin deferring a portion of recruited teenagers into the pipeline. During the next fiscal year, the services should continue to expand the capacity and infrastructure of the DEP while implementing an annual audit of the system. The DoD should also begin phasing in the new 20-year-old age minimum one service at a time beginning with the Air Force. The Air Force is the recommended service due to it relying on the fewest number of teenaged recruits by both percentage and gross numbers and thus experiencing the smallest potential impact.

Over the next two fiscal years, the DoD should sponsor a study measuring the real effects felt by the Air Force from the new recruiting age minimum. Of note, the recommendation to use the Air Force as the pilot program takes into account that the commissioning and training program for pilots will not be affected by the policy changes. These results, coupled with service issued surveys of all recruiting commands targeting perceived challenges, can help drive additional policy requirements to maximize impacts while mitigating recruitment and retention challenges. In the following fiscal year, the DoD should then phase in the Navy for the new age minimum while taking into account the study and survey results. The DoD should repeat the two-year study initially targeted towards the Air Force while including both services with the updated age policy. This repeat study can capitalize on the baseline information gathered in the first two fiscal years while measuring for increased challenges in broadening the age policy to the last two services. By the time the Navy implements the policy update, the expanded DEPs in each service will begin returning its initial entrants under contract to each service. The initial latency of the DEP progresses while services still have the opportunity to recruit teenagers.

The final phase-in of the adjusted minimum enlistment age in the Army and Marines should occur five fiscal years from initial implementation. The Army and Marines recruit the highest number of teenagers by number and percentage respectively. The five-year timeframe from initial implementation coupled with two multiyear studies provide the two most vulnerable services with the time and information needed to identify and navigate challenges. The total recommended timeline is ten years from initial notification to universal application with multiple checkpoints and opportunities for adjustment. In order to qualify the anticipated positive effects, trend analysis of behavioral health diagnoses, non-judicial punishment adjudication, and unit

readiness metrics should begin with the data from two fiscal years after universal implementation.

Additional adjacent policy change recommendations work in tandem with the phased update to the age requirement and seek to minimize the impact on recruiters and recruitment while also limiting the necessary increase in financial cost per servicemember. Military services continue to push talent management into the forefront as senior leaders evaluate options relating to force structure and personnel challenges. Since the end of conscription and the introduction of the AVF, the individual decision for military service assumed many characteristics similar to the views of Thomas Hobbes such as self-interest and incentivization to serve.⁴⁹ In order to continue the necessary number of accessions to maintain force structure, the DoD should allocate staff resources and funds to evaluate and prioritize updates in recruitment and retention policies across the services. By deliberately shrinking the pool of available recruits to increase the relative maturity and quality, the services face two key personnel challenges. They can either recruit a higher percentage of the available population within the 20 years and older demographics in order to absorb the loss of teenagers, reduce the overall voluntary turnover rate by retaining a greater number of servicemembers in their respective grades for longer, or both. Adjusting DoD and service specific policies to address either of these challenges is an admittedly difficult prospect that requires significant input from functional practitioners (Recruiters and Career Managers), organizational leaders, and policy specialists.

Table 1.2
 Percentage of Accessions Under 20 by Service for FY 14 to FY 17

Service	FY 14	FY 15	FY 16	FY 17
Navy	64	65	64	67
Marines	83	84	83	84
Air Force	66	66	65	65
Army	62	66	65	65

Source: Data compiled from Office of the Under Secretary of Defense, Personnel and Readiness. Population Representation in the Military Services: Summary Report for FYs 2014-2017

Services should not only continue advertising and targeting civilians who are about to complete high school but also expand the DEP. A revised DEP should offer full tuition funding for two years at a state university in order to allow the applicant to complete his or her associate's degree. The DoD could offset the initial cost of each entrant into the program by reducing his or her GI Bill benefits a commensurate amount. As an added integration with service retention, services could provide an option to earn full educational benefits through extended service much like the service academy or Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) models.⁵⁰ If a candidate fails to complete their degree or becomes otherwise ineligible for service, the education funding transitions to a student loan that must then be repaid recuperating the initial investment by the government. This expanded delayed entry program utilizes the cost deferment and recuperation methods of the widely ROTC program while not incurring the cost of additional cadre or training.⁵¹ The initial investment, however, places the financial burden on the DoD, but the Department of Veterans Affairs benefits from the cost savings of servicemembers who choose to leave service before reestablishing their GI benefits.⁵²

It cost an average of \$3,750 per year to earn an Associates Degree at a public institution in 2018 which is the most recent data currently available.⁵³ That equals an average initial investment of \$7,500 per recruit who successfully completes the program. The Army accessions

goal in 2018 was 76,500 people of which they attained 69,972.⁵⁴ 65% of the Army’s attained accessions were under 20 years old (49,725)⁵⁵ which places the maximum investment at \$373M if offered proportionally. This example shows the cost of one service applying this program to the maximum number of recruits needed to adjust for an increased age minimum for enlistment and highlights two program challenges. The first implementation challenge is the cost incurred by the services. The program could be scaled annually by each service to meet budgetary restraints and personnel requirements aligned against the NDAA each fiscal year. In addition, coordination with the Department of Veterans Affairs to study trends in budget savings directly tied to reduced post-service education benefits for DEP enrollees could provide additional insight in making budget recommendations to congressional appropriators for future NDAs. The second implementation challenge is the added difficulty associated with forecasting and funding initial entry personnel requirements two years into the future. DoD policy could include provisions for either early activation or offered deferral in the event of severe requirement adjustments.

Table 1.3
Application of Scale for Delayed Entry Program Expansion FY 2018

Service	Accessions Goal	Accessions Attained	Under 20 Years Old (%)	Max DEP Investment
Navy	39,000	39,018	26,130 (67)	\$196M*
Marines	31,556	31,567	26,507 (84)	\$199M*
Air Force	29,450	30,343	19,142 (65)	\$144M*
Army	76,50062	69,972	49,725 (65)	\$373M*

All dollar figures rounded **up to the nearest million*

Source: Data compiled from Office of the Under Secretary of Defense, Personnel and Readiness. Population Representation in the Military Services: Summary Report for FYs 2014-2017.

In order to minimize the financial strain of transitioning the risk associated with new recruits from readiness to an “in the door” investment of money and time, retention policies need to be restructured to ensure a return on investment. The cost per recruit using the delayed entry

pipeline becomes heavily frontloaded instead of sustained benefits spread out later or after a career. This necessitates a marked change in retention strategy and, to a lesser extent, service identity in order to reduce both the financial burden of personnel turnover and the increased strain on service recruiters. The Marine Corps identity as a “One-Enlistment Service” and as a revolving door for American teenagers looking for a structured environment to set them on the path for future endeavors must fundamentally change. This change begins with policy incentivizing both servicemembers to reenlist and career counselors to aggressively serve their populations. Voluntary and involuntary separations naturally occur and are a fundamental planning factor in adjusting fiscal year recruitment goals, however, minimizing voluntary separations is achievable by adjusting the culture of each service through incentivization of individuals and career counselors, accountability of leadership, and direct service messaging.

Deliberate messaging focusing on states and areas that provide higher proportions of military recruits utilizing strategic outreach programs provides a vital service. This statutory change holds the distinct possibility of manufacturing a further separation of civilians and the military. Transparency and communication to convey how the change will ultimately lead to a more professional military force with an increased capacity to serve the public is necessary to prevent citizens and politicians from misconstruing this policy action. The selectivity of military accessions plays a pivotal role in providing a professional military in the service of the state.

CHALLENGES INVOLVED IN UPDATING POLICY

There are acknowledged difficulties in changing the minimum age of enlistment that provide challenges for the services in enacting this new policy. The first challenge is the shrinking pool of eligible personnel. The Army failed to meet its recruitment goal in fiscal year 2018⁵⁶ which illustrates some of the underlying tensions surrounding the need to recruit quality

civilians to replace and grow the force. Acknowledging the difficult task held by the recruiters in each of the services, there are still more American civilians over the age of 20 who will meet the necessary requirements for military service than are needed to serve. As an example, if the policy to raise the minimum age to enlist was enacted for fiscal year 2017 the DoD would lose access to 8,488,793 men and women aged 18 to 19 years old. However, there were still 39.5 million Americans aged 20 to 28 in the pool of people available for service in 2017.⁵⁷ The deliberate pairing of the increased minimum age with both recruitment and retention incentive programs aims to minimize the number of recruits needed due to voluntary turnover, increase deployment readiness within units who then have more of their force ready to them, and increase professional competitiveness of the military. The resulting refined population created by the new age restriction will net a baseline of recruits with a higher level of maturity than can make a longer-term decision about military service. In addition, recruits with special qualifications that offset otherwise disqualifying conditions already fall within an expanding and contracting waiver system.⁵⁸ This recommended change does not seek to do away with that system. With the increase in focused recruitment on Generation Z, the recruitment policy review across the services necessitated by the age requirement provides an opportunity to adjust the existing waiver system to target people who have developed specialized skills in high value emerging fields.

A second area of concern is increased competition with private industry. A competitive advantage for military recruitment lies in targeting recruits younger than the recruitment pool for private industry. Increasing the age requirement to 20 continues to target civilians prior to their peak competitiveness for civilian employment which still revolves around attainment of a college degree.⁵⁹ The military continues to compete cyclically with private industry largely based on the

availability of jobs and the unemployment rate,⁶⁰ however, by not instituting a post-secondary degree requirement the military remains financially competitive with other industries that also do not have this requirement. Current and continuing trends show that employment in the private sector of industry continues to depend more on level of education and relevant work experience and not on age.⁶¹ Although delaying entry into the military until 20 forces civilians to make the decision of whether they will pursue post-secondary education, it does not predicate enlisted service on any advanced degree. Those service members who initially joined the military because they “were not ready for college” would not be under any obligation to go to college in the interim between high school and joining the military. However, the first adult decision that they potentially have to make will no longer be whether they join the military. It will be what they do to develop as an adult in the interim.

An additional challenge within the DoD of implementing a minimum age increase and subsequent supporting policy changes is service reluctance to change. The decision to increase the minimum age hinges on the universality of the policy throughout the DoD and eventual legislation. This impacts the Army and Marine Corps disproportionately greater than the other services. The Army has the highest annual turnover of any service with a 76,500 accessions goal in fiscal year 2018 and 65% of its achieved number of recruits under 20 years old.⁶² The Marine Corps, while requiring a much smaller number of recruits at 31,556, relied disproportionately on recruits under 20 years old at 84% in fiscal year 2018.⁶³ These percentages are consistent across the last five fiscal years, while the overall number of required accessions fluctuated with authorized end strengths dictated within the relevant NDAAAs.⁶⁴ Service apprehension can and should be assuaged by openness and transparency as to the methods, end state, and reasoning behind the policy implementation. A lead time of five fiscal years prior to universal

implementation allows services to adjust budget requests and structure policy rollouts. Flexibility in implementation could open the door for unwanted service parochialism in one service targeting a population no longer eligible for another, so eventual universal implementation overseen by the Office of the Secretary of Defense would limit those concerns as well.

A further concern may be the ability of the Department of Defense implementing this change as a precursor to longer term legislative changes. The legislative vehicle for adjusting the minimum age for active service already exists in the annual National Defense Authorization Act. The law serves as an ideal medium for legislative discussion and eventual bipartisan approval, and previous NDAA's included legislative items to change age standards in the USC as recently as 2006.⁶⁵ The transparency and communication from the DoD in transmitting its intentions to Congress through the House Armed Services Committee (HASC) and Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) and to the Executive Branch through the Secretary of Defense will set the stage for the dialog necessary to provide clear context, intent, costs, and benefits to the proposal.

A social concern with the eventual elimination of teenaged military recruits is centered around the concept of military service providing upward financial mobility for middle to lower class Americans who may not have other viable alternatives. Military access, since the implementation of the AVF, effectively acts as a social safety net for teenagers attempting to financially elevate themselves out of situations that they were not necessarily responsible for getting into in the first place. Fierce resistance will meet any attempt to apply a change to what has been normalized over the past five decades, however, taking slow and deliberate steps that gradually phase out teenage enlistment using publicly released data to identify and mitigate concerns presents the most appropriate means of assuaging popular concerns.

CONCLUSION

The Department of Defense demographically better represents a cross section of society now than in 1973, however, inclusivity of people without an existing connection to the military remains low. As war becomes more complex and individual lethality increases, the demands on younger Soldiers are growing, and the intellectual maturity of 18-year-olds cannot keep up. This expectation-capability gap between the military and the teenagers it recruits continues to expand with normalizing societal expectations only exacerbating the issue. This gap will continue placing unnecessary stressors on socially unprepared servicemembers causing disciplinary, resilience, and readiness issues until the military either realigns its expectations with societal norms or adjusts the demographic of its initial entry population. The gradual and phased statutory change in the minimum age to enlist from 18 to 20 years old represents many challenges to the prospect of maintaining force requirements in an all-volunteer force during a period of economic expansion and a time when the available percentage of the American population who meet the basic requirements for service continues to shrink. None of these challenges, however, represent an insurmountable obstacle, and the Department of Defense can feasibly implement the change resulting in a higher quality, lower turnover, more resilient force capable of meeting the demands of the nation it serves.

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