

Declining Interest in Military Service: Qualitative Insights

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ABSTRACT

Recent years have seen a decline in young men's propensity for military service, particularly among young Black men. At the behest of the House Committee on National Security (Fiscal Year 1996 National Defense Authorization Act, Report 104-131, Section 564), the Defense Department conducted focus groups with young men, and parents of young men, to identify factors that might explain the decline in propensity. Although no definitive explanation for the recent decline in propensity was found, the study identified a number of factors that affect interest in military service.

Background

The Youth Attitude Tracking Study (YATS), an annual Defense Department survey of civilian youth, monitors enlistment propensity -- the percent of youth who say they will "definitely" or "probably" enter military service. The propensity of 16-21 year-old men dropped from a high of 34 percent in 1991 to an historic low of 26 percent in 1994. The drop in propensity among young Black men is even greater, from 49 percent in 1991 to 32 percent in 1994. Enlistment propensity of young women has not declined.

YATS also shows the majority of young men report conversations with their friends, parents, and acquaintances of their parents' generation as a major source of perceptions of military service. Unfortunately, YATS provides little detail on the nature of these conversations, or of the actual perceptions formed. For example, because of the importance of the quantitative trend data derived from these highly structured (YATS) interviews, interviewers cannot stop and ask probing questions regarding the thought processes underpinning a respondent's answers. To obtain this type of information, the Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC) convened focus groups with young men and the parents of young men to explore their views of military service for young men graduating from high school. This research was conducted July - October, 1995.

- Male Youth Research. Twenty-six focus groups were conducted with young men in four cities: Raleigh, Dallas, Detroit and Baltimore. In each city, four types of groups were convened: White high school seniors; White, recent high school graduates; Black high school seniors; and Black, recent high school graduates. Young men meeting the educational criteria were further screened for military experience. Classified as ineligible were those youth currently in the DoD Delayed Entry Program or previously in the military. Also, the number of youth whose parents were veterans was limited. These criteria were implemented so groups would be representative of the male population from which Defense recruits.
- Parent Research. Twelve focus groups were conducted with parents in three cities: Detroit, Baltimore and Raleigh. These involved parents of young men who were eligible, but not selected for inclusion in the earlier youth focus groups. In each city, four types of groups were convened: Black fathers, White fathers, Black mothers and White mothers. Parent groups included people whose sons met the youth screening criteria, who were not currently serving in the Reserves or on active duty, and who had not been career military members.
- Focus Group Discussions. Focus group sessions lasted two hours and discussion leaders used a loosely structured agenda that elicited information from youth and parents on young men's: (1) current world, e.g., work, go to school; (2) future plans and lifestyles; (3) type of work/job that appeals to them and the job attributes that would be important, e.g., helping others, mental challenge; (4) perceptions of the military and who joins and why; (5) where they obtain their information and perceptions of the world of work and the military; (6) who influences their decision making; and (7) the nature of parent/youth discussions.

Focus Group Results

Overall, youth who participated in the focus groups reported the drawbacks to military service outweighed the benefits. The drawbacks cited are small in number, but youth viewed them as insurmountable obstacles to enlisting. These were: (1) their impressions of boot camp and the discipline associated with enlisted military life; (2) the perceived long enlistment commitment (4+ years) and interruption of life; and (3) the potential danger of military service, which was linked to their skepticism about the military's humanitarian and peacekeeping roles in other countries.

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Youth told very specific stories, mostly derived from conversations with friends who had enlisted, of the miseries of military life. In numerous focus groups, participants' indication of disinterest in military services was an initial reference to "getting up at five in the morning and doing push-ups or something." Also, these youths were clearly intimidated by what they believed would be the countless humiliations of boot camp. In every group, they told derisive boot camp stories -- recruits being yelled at, submission to what they perceived as pointless discipline and unwarranted humiliation. There were discussions of why performing senseless tasks, such as scrubbing a washroom with a toothbrush, was the way military discipline was taught. When asked what military life would be like after boot camp, youth did not seem to know if the perils of boot camp would continue once they were in their first assignment.

What do young men want today? Throughout the 26 focus group sessions, young men consistently reported they wanted a good, enjoyable career/job, where they could pay bills and have money left over. Most viewed getting more education (going to college) as the route to a good job and ultimately good pay or financial independence. Education was seen as the means to an end -- it would lead to good jobs. Although youth and parents knew enlistment in the military offered good college benefits, both groups saw enlisting as an interruption in life. In contrast, young men and parents viewed entering the military as an officer positively. Not only would a young man have a college degree in hand, but being an officer for a while would look good on a resume', which would lead later to a good job and good pay. Based on both YATS data and focus group results, it is clear that money matters to youth. In a private sector survey of teens last year, researchers reported the biggest worry of young men was not having enough money.

When youth were asked how they would pay for college if conventional sources disappeared (loans, parent funding), it was disappointing that only a few mentioned joining the military to obtain funding. Youth reported numerous other alternative scenarios: they would work one semester, go to school one semester; they would work during the day and go to school at night, etc. When asked why they would not take advantage of the military's educational funding programs, young men once again reverted to discussions of the obstacles in joining: lack of personal freedom, humiliations of boot camp, long-term commitment, deferring their education and career, and the potential dangers in serving in today's military. Finally, young men and parents in the DoD focus groups never mentioned in-Service education programs. They seemed unaware that some enlistees earn college credits while in military service.

Young men and parents knew the military is hiring. They said they were swamped with recruiting literature. Some parents reported throwing the literature away, particularly moms, so their sons would not see it. Unfortunately, recruiting literature/advertising and recruiters appear to have little credibility with parents and youth. Over and over, parents and youth referred to recruiters and advertising as "painting a rosy picture" that was not believable. Recruiters were perceived as conducting excessive, ineffective soliciting of uninterested youth. Both parents and youth did not trust military recruiters and believed advertising messages are inaccurate and inflated.

The focus group results suggest that youth today generally view the military as less attractive than before the end of the Cold War. A considerable number of young men indicated they did not wish to serve as peacekeepers in foreign countries. They indicated that military service had become more dangerous. Some seemed to think that, if they were in uniform when US troops were deployed, they would inevitably be deployed and, consequently, be put in harm's way. Some suggested that recent military ventures were motivated by the interests of national leaders -- Congress or the President -- but were not in the national interest. They objected to being put in jeopardy to fight someone else's battles. Perceived hazards of military service were not limited to casualties in hostile conflicts; the possibility of accidents with munitions or exposure to dangerous chemicals, radiation, and disease were also mentioned.

Youth reported working diligently throughout their teen years to establish a personal identity and to become independent of their parents. They viewed joining the military as the antithesis of those goals. Youth identified regimentation with military service -- that those in the military are told what to do, when to do it, with no latitude for individual expression or determination. They knew little of what military life is really like, and did not see any link between their own career development and military service. Youth could articulate how they could progress in a general, civilian career and their hopes that good pay would accompany their progress. However, youth could not articulate much about military jobs or pay or how being in a military job could contribute to their overall career.

Another frequently expressed concern was that the decision to enlist has lasting, irrevocable consequences. Estimates of the duration of military service varied, but references to four or five years were common, and participants often noted that military personnel are not free to change their minds if, after a short period of time, they decide the military is not for them. On the contrary, they saw being in the military as being "owned" by the

military -- that military personnel have to do what they are told, no matter what. Some believed that the military is not bound to pre-enlistment agreements, and that enlisted personnel are bound by military orders regardless of prior agreements.

With regard to parent findings, few thought enlistment in the military was the right choice for their son. Parents also expressed skepticism that their sons could adapt to the discipline of military life. Almost all parents reported they wanted their sons to make their own decisions. Both moms and dads viewed themselves as nurturing and supportive of their sons, but they wanted their sons to make the actual decisions since they had to live with the outcomes. Even parents who said the "military is not for my son," indicated they would support their son's decision to enter the military provided the young man based the decision on "honest, objective information" and wasn't pressured into doing so by a military recruiter.

When asked who should join the military, parents thought the military would be good for those who need discipline, are not mature enough, are indecisive about their future or are unable to finance their education or vocational goals. Parents expressed concerns that their sons could be harmed, and their comments indicated they generally were not supportive of the military's humanitarian and peacekeeping role in other countries. On the other hand, both parents and youth did not question the need for military service in either defense of our own country or in domestic assistance, e.g., hurricane relief.

Why Has Propensity Declined Since 1991?

From YATS data we know that most of the reasons young men offer for not joining the military have not changed significantly in those past four years. Data on perceived discipline and regimentation young men tend to associate with military service have not changed. Also, young men report post Cold War events, such as the deployment of troops on humanitarian and peacekeeping missions, make them less likely to enlist. This effect applies to both Black and White youth.

What else do we know? First, college aspirations correlate negatively with enlistment propensity. The percent of youth, both Black and White, attending college is increasing. However, this trend also is not limited to the past four years. Second, persons who have served in the military often encourage others to do so, and the percent of veterans in the population is decreasing. However, this trend is not peculiar to the past five years.

In the focus group sessions, very few differences, by race, were observed for either young men or parents. Black youth and parents tended to be somewhat more community-oriented. They seemed more sensitive to the dangers of military service and debated whether the military was a good environment for Blacks today. Black parents said the military historically had been viewed as an honorable way of achieving upward mobility. However, Black parents indicated they greatly preferred their sons follow the more traditional path of White youth -- going to college.

There were generally no differences between Black and White youth regarding their aspirations. Nearly all youth in the focus groups believed a college education was necessary to acquire the desirable, higher paying jobs they wanted. For a few, the linkage between college education and their aspirations was explicit -- their college major, and often their summer jobs, were logical steps toward the career they wanted. A few young men said that college was not necessarily part of their plans, or suggested that a college education was not necessary. However, they recognized the current social norm is to plan on college after high school, and they knew, generally, that the prospects of college graduates are substantially better than the prospects of those with less formal education. In the end, though, the young men interviewed thought the drawbacks to military service far outweighed the benefits.

Focus group discussions with young men were dominated by participants who did not expect to join the military. Some were quite vocal in their rejection of the military, suggesting they would go to great lengths to avoid service. Most said that, while they placed a high value on getting a college education, they would join the military for the educational funding only as a last resort. Others offered less emotional reactions, noting that the perceived benefits of military service - self discipline or educational funding -- were benefits they didn't need. Their college education was funded, and they had learned to discipline themselves. To them, military service represented an unneeded, four-year delay in achieving career goals.

Some young men advocated military service, though they were less vocal than those who objected to military service. Some indicated they had considered the military, pointing to various tangible benefits (e.g., educational funding, job security). Several participants noted that friends and family, their peers or those of an earlier generation, had benefited from military service. Anecdotal descriptions of acquaintances benefiting from military service often included stories of a friend who was "straightened out" as a result of military service. They

described those who had served in the military as becoming more serious, more disciplined, and more goal-oriented.

Summary

Youth interest in the military has declined significantly over the last four years. To better understand reasons for the decline, the Department conducted 38 focus groups with young men and parents of enlistment-eligible young men for the specific purpose of developing a better understanding of underlying reasons for the decline in propensity. In particular, both Black and White youth and parent focus groups were conducted with the hope of finding reasons for the precipitous decline in Black propensity.

Major Male Youth Findings:

- youth knew we are hiring; every participant was familiar with recruiters and many reported, sometimes in a very negative way, repeated contacts with recruiters.
- most young men thought college was their next step in life but, when asked how they would obtain money for college if conventional sources such as parents, scholarships, and loans were not available, few mentioned joining the military to obtain educational funding.
- youth knew the military had programs to fund college expenses, but they generally felt the sacrifices were too great, e.g., four years too long a commitment, loss of control of daily life.
- youth indicated boot camp experiences were too demanding.
- those who expressed an interest in the military or viewed it as a possibility if going to college became difficult often had family members who had served or were currently serving in the military.
- young men reported learning most about the military from other family members who had served, and older friends or youth in their neighborhood who had enlisted; media sources also were mentioned, e.g., ads and movies.
- parents usually had the greatest influence on youth decisions, including joining the military.
- youth viewed the post Cold War military as more dangerous; they were skeptical about military peacekeeping roles in foreign countries and thought such assignments would be dangerous.

Major Parent Findings:

- parents were aware we are recruiting and that DoD is downsizing and closing facilities.
- they believed college or post high school training is important for their sons.
- they viewed their influence on sons' choices as nurturing and supportive. Both moms and dads said they would support their son's decision to enlist if the son really wanted to do it. Parents, however, were leery of military recruiters "painting a rosy picture" of military life and sons making decisions based on inaccurate information. Most focus groups had parents who discussed specific cases where youth they knew had enlisted and had not gotten what they thought was promised to them, e.g., occupational specialty, training, geographic assignment.
- they knew educational benefits were available to youth who enlisted but seemed confused about what the benefits actually were. No parents expressed knowledge of in-Service educational benefits available to youth who enlist.
- they thought the military would be good for youth who need discipline, are not mature enough, are indecisive about their future, or are unable to finance their educational or vocational goals.
- they believed the military is different since Desert Shield/Desert Storm. Many parents expressed fear that if their sons enlisted, they could be harmed since the military most likely would continue to be involved in hostile skirmishes in foreign places. Parents generally were not supportive of this evolving role for the United States military.
- they largely believed that racism and gender discrimination still exist in the military.

The focus group research did not identify any single explanation for young men's declining interest in the military service. This research also did not find substantive explanations for the precipitous decline in Black men's propensity to enlist. However, the interviews did produce some valuable insights regarding youth and parent perceptions of military service. These were summarized in this paper. For example, we learned that they perceived the military as increasingly dangerous and generally were not supportive of the military's humanitarian and peacekeeping roles in foreign countries. Mistrust of recruiters and recruiting literature is almost universal among youth and parents. These, as well as other focus group findings, were then further explored in a special

YATS in-depth interview study. The findings also led to the addition and refinement of YATS survey items. Hopefully, these two follow-on projects will continue to increase our understanding of the decline of young men's propensity to enlist.

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