

Declining Interest in Military Service: Quantitative ObservationsJerry Lehnus & Anita Lancaster
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ABSTRACT

Recent years have seen a decline in propensity for military service, particularly among young African-American men. The Defense Department conducted focus groups with young men, and parents of young men, which identified numerous factors that might explain the decline in propensity. Historical quantitative data from the Youth Attitude Tracking Study and other sources provide an indication of the prevalence of various factors in the youth and parental population, of differences between African-Americans and whites, and of recent trends in those factors. These data are examined to determine to what degree they account for either the recent decline in propensity or for differences in interest in military service between African-Americans and their white counterparts.

Declining Propensity and the Youth Attitude Tracking Study

The Youth Attitude Tracking Study (YATS) is an annual survey of approximately 10,000 16-24 year-old men and women, provides the Department of Defense with a reliable measure of trends in propensity for military service. The key propensity measure in YATS is based on a series of questions asking youth the likelihood they will be serving in the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force in the next few years. The percent of youth indicating they will "definitely" or "probably" join a specific Service is used as a measure of propensity for that Service, while the percent indicating they will "definitely" or "probably" be serving in at least one of the active Services is used as a composite measure of military propensity in general. Research shows that propensity measured by YATS is significantly correlated with enlistment behavior.

Propensity generally rose during the military build-up of the Reagan administration, and dropped off dramatically from 1991 through 1994. Among all 16-21 year-old men, it fell from 34 percent in 1991 to 26 percent in 1994. Among young black men, it fell from 49 percent in 1991 to 32 percent in 1994. The decline in propensity corresponded to recruiting difficulty following Operation Desert Storm, and DoD investigated. Focus groups with young men, and parents of young men, generated several hypotheses that might explain why propensity was declining, and why propensity among black men had declined more than propensity among whites. This qualitative research suggested several factors that might explain the decline in propensity, particularly among black men. This paper examines available quantitative data related to some of these factors.

Objections to Military Service

Focus groups suggested young men have a "bootcamp" perception of military life, with a lot of strenuous exercise, pre-dawn awakening, and dangers associated verbal abuse. Some mention regimentation, with little latitude left for individual choice of methods to accomplish an objective. Many objected to the length of commitment. They also mentioned the with military service, or objected to killing other humans.

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Since 1991, YATS respondents have been asked, "What is the main reason you would not consider enlisting in the military service?" The most common responses are consistent with objections to military service heard in the focus groups (Table 1). Most frequently, young men mention reasons tabulated as "military lifestyle." These would include military discipline and regimentation discussed in the focus groups. Young men also object to the length of the commitment, consistent with focus group comments that enlistment entails a long, irrevocable commitment. YATS data show that both those concerned with the dangers of military service ("threat to life") and conscientious objectors ("against beliefs") are much more common among blacks than whites. Many young males (whites even more so than blacks) offer reasons tabulated as "other career interests" or "conflicting educational plans" that are not objections to military service, *per se*, but an indication that they have more attractive opportunities elsewhere. These are reminiscent of focus group participants who knew what they wanted to do with their education and career, had the means to proceed (i.e., college was paid for), and were not motivated to defer their plans to enlist for 4 years.

Table 1
Main Reasons for Not Entering Military Service
(percent)

<u>Reason</u>	<u>All</u>	<u>White</u>	<u>Black</u>
Dislike Military Lifestyle	13	13	15
Long Commitment	10	11	7
Other Career Interests	10	11	6
Threat to Life	7	5	12
Conflicting Family Obligation	6	5	2
Against Beliefs	4	4	7
Conflicting Education Plans	3	4	2
Health	3	3	1
Pay/Money	1	2	0
Not Qualified	1	1	0

Source: 1995 YATS

Some trends are consistent with declining propensity; others are not. The percent of young men mentioning the length of commitment as a reason for not joining has grown, from 7 percent in 1991 (8 percent for whites; 2 percent for blacks) to 10 percent in 1995 (11 percent for whites; 7 percent for blacks). On the other hand, during the same time period, the percent of young men indicating that military service was "against their beliefs" or a "threat to life" did not change significantly among either young white or black men.

Post Cold War Military Operations

In the focus group discussions, both young men and parents said they did not think recent military deployments merited their risking their lives or their sons' lives. For the past several years, YATS respondents have been asked whether current military operations made them more likely to enlist or less likely to enlist, or whether it had no effect on them. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Young Men's Perceptions of the Effect of Defense-Related Events on Their Likelihood to Serve in the Military (percent)

<u>Defense-Related Event</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>Less Likely</u>	<u>No Effect</u>	<u>More Likely</u>	<u>Net Effect</u>
All Men					
Operation Desert Shield	1990	33	49	18	-16
Desert Storm Victory	1991	13	59	29	16
Desert Storm Victory	1992	22	50	28	6
Somalia Peacekeeping	1993	41	47	12	-28
Haiti Involvement	1994	43	48	9	-33
White Men					
Operation Desert Shield	1990	31	51	18	-13
Desert Storm Victory	1991	10	61	30	20
Desert Storm Victory	1992	19	53	28	10
Somalia Peacekeeping	1993	39	51	10	-29
Haiti Involvement	1994	42	51	6	-36
Black Men					
Operation Desert Shield	1990	42	44	14	-28
Desert Storm Victory	1991	24	51	25	1
Desert Storm Victory	1992	37	43	20	-16
Somalia Peacekeeping	1993	51	36	14	-37
Haiti Involvement	1994	44	44	11	-33

Source: 1990 - 1994 YATS

Consistent with focus group discussions, young men report recent deployments of U.S. forces to Somalia and Haiti have a net negative effect (i.e., the percent "less likely" subtracted from the percent "more likely"). Moreover, recent operations appear to have a

negative effect on more white men than did Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm in 1990.*

Interest in Postsecondary Education

Focus groups suggested most young men see a college education as indispensable in gaining job security and prosperity in America, and they see military service as inconsistent with their going on to college. In fact, the 1995 YATS shows nearly three out of four male high school seniors, regardless of race, say they plan to go to school after high school graduation and that they would like to complete at least a bachelor's degree. As Table 2 shows, the percent of high school graduates enrolling in college within a year of graduation is increasing.

* The question addressed the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and deployment of U.S. troops. Interviews were being conducted, however, during the air bombardment of Iraq as well as during Operation Desert Shield.

Table 2
College Enrollment Rates of High School Graduates
(percent)

<u>Year</u>	<u>All</u>	<u>White</u>	<u>Black</u>
1985	58	59	42
1986	54	56	37
1987	57	57	52
1988	59	61	45
1989	60	60	53
1990	60	62	46
1991	62	65	46
1992	62	63	48
1993	63	63	56
1994	62	64	51

Source: Digest of Educational Statistics, 1995; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (NCES 95-029), Table 177

However, since the trends are reasonably linear, and started long before the decline in propensity, this does not appear to provide a reasonable explanation of declining propensity. Moreover, with rising college costs* and educational funding available from the Services, some youth will enter military service because of their desire for higher education. Indeed, among those reporting increased interest in military service, 23 percent of whites and 18 percent of blacks cited money for college as a reason for increased interest.

Influencers and Veterans

Focus group participants often mentioned persons they know who have entered military service, either of their own or of an older generation. YATS data show persons who are, or have been, in military service have a strong influence on interest in the military. Of those who say their interest has increased in the past year, 11 percent say it is because of someone they know who has been in military service (for simplicity, I will refer to both persons who are in military service at the present time, and those who have served previously, as "veterans"). Young men say they get their perceptions of military service from people they know (friends, parents, other relatives) and from the media (movies, advertisements, etc.). Nine times out of ten, "people" sources are veterans.

Many young men say they have discussed military service with a friend or one of their parents in the past year (in 1995, 19 percent mentioned talking to a friend, 19 percent to their father, and 18 percent to their mother). About half of those who spoke to a friend or their father say that the friend/father was a veteran. Veterans are more likely to endorse military service, while nonveterans are about as likely to be neutral as to endorse military service. Thus, veterans in the population appear to have a positive influence on propensity.

* Data from the National Center for Educational Statistics show college costs have nearly doubled in the past ten years. Digest of Educational Statistics, 1995; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (NCES 95-29), Table 306.

Because of the drawdown, clearly the number of young men who are veterans is declining. Recent accessions might serve as a proxy for young men's peers who can relate information about military service. Figure 1 shows the total enlisted accessions, by race and fiscal year, as a percentage of the 17-24 year-old civilian population. The severe drop in black accessions beginning in 1989 might be logically related to the drop in black propensity. If decreased accessions, which are the result of policy decision, cause decreased propensity, we would expect the drop in accessions to precede the drop in propensity. The dip in black propensity in 1990 might be read as a temporary reaction to Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, preceding a sustained drop as a result of depressed accession rates.

Figure 1

**White & Black Enlisted Accessions
(percent of 16-24 year-old civilians)**



However, there does not appear to be a parallel relationship between the decline in white accession rates and the decline in white propensity. The decline in white accessions, as a percentage of the youth population, appear to have begun in 1986, 5 years before the decline in white propensity.

We know that young men are also influenced by fathers, and that veterans are more supportive of military service than nonveterans. Historical trends show that the percentage of veterans among fathers of enlistment age men is also declining (Figure 2). However, there does not appear to be any relationship between the decline in veteran fathers, and the decline in propensity.

Figure 2

**Veteran Status of Fathers of 18 Year-Olds
1985 - 2010**



Summary and Conclusions

Propensity among young men, especially blacks, declined from 1991 through 1994.

Focus groups suggested several explanations. Examination of quantitative data, however, does not provide a satisfying explanation for the decline. Youth object to the "military lifestyle," which they seem to identify with regimentation and a "bootcamp" regimen. However, objections to the military lifestyle is not increasing. Similarly, youth mention danger associated with military service, and object to killing. But the frequency with which these objections are referenced is not increasing.

Some youth suggest that recent military ventures are not in the national interest, and YATS data indicate that recent ventures, such as peacekeeping efforts in Somalia and Haiti, have a greater negative effect on interest in the military than did earlier ventures, such as Operation Desert Shield, even Operation Desert Shield before the successful ground war.

Most young men want to go to college, and would see military service as an unacceptable delay in getting on with this ambition. However, college interest has been increasing gradually since long before the decline in propensity. Similarly, the decline in the veteran population, either young men's peers or elders, would be consistent with declining propensity. Again, however, the trends don't match declining propensity, especially among whites.

All in all, a satisfying explanation for declining propensity has not yet been identified.

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