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Defense Primer: Active Component Enlisted Retention

Retention

The term *retention* refers to the rate at which military personnel voluntarily choose to stay in the military after their obligated term of service has ended as determined by their enlistment contract (typically less than six years for an initial contract). Imbalances in the retention rate can cause problems within the military personnel system. A common retention concern is that too few people will stay in, thereby creating a shortage of experienced leaders, decreasing military efficiency, and lowering job satisfaction. This was a particular concern from 2004 to 2009, as the stress of major combat deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan raised concerns about the willingness of military personnel to continue serving. The opposite concern may also occur at times, particularly during force drawdowns: that too many people will stay in, thereby decreasing promotion opportunities and possibly requiring involuntarily separations to prevent the organization from becoming “top heavy” with middle- and upper-level leaders or to comply with end-strength limitations. Each of these imbalances can also have a negative impact on recruiting by making the military a less-attractive career option.

Congressional Role

The Constitution provides Congress with broad powers over the Armed Forces, including the power “To raise and support Armies” and “To provide and maintain a Navy.” In the exercise of this authority, Congress has historically shown great interest in maintaining military retention rates sufficient to sustain a fully manned and capable military workforce. Through its oversight powers, Congress monitors the performance of the Executive Branch in managing the size and quality of the military workforce.

Congress influences retention rates in a variety of ways, including authorizing and funding

- overall compensation levels, particularly in light of their competitiveness with private-sector compensation;
- quality-of-life initiatives that enhance servicemember and family member satisfaction with a military career;
- retention programs that provide for dedicated career counselors; and
- retention incentives, such as reenlistment bonuses.

More broadly, congressionally established personnel end-strength levels can influence each armed service’s retention

goals. For example, if Congress were to substantially increase the end-strength for an armed service, that service would generally require a greater number of new recruits, higher rates of retention among current servicemembers, or some combination of the two. Congress also establishes criteria that affect eligibility for continued service, such as disability separation and retirement (Title 10 *U.S. Code*, Chapter 61) and punitive discharge for criminal activity (Title 10 *U.S. Code*, Chapter 45).

Retention Goals and Results

Table 1 lists active component enlisted retention goals and results for FY2022-FY2024. The data are broken out by armed service and *retention zones*, which are established by each armed service to reflect important phases in the military career lifecycle. The armed services define their primary retention zones as follows:

For Navy, Air Force, and Space Force:

- **Zone A (Initial Term):** serving in first enlistment with less than 6 years of service.
- **Zone B (Midcareer):** second or subsequent enlistment with less than 10 years of service.
- **Zone C (Career):** second or subsequent enlistment with 10-14 years of service.

The Navy and Air Force also have a Zone D and Zone E, which are not shown in **Table 1**. Navy Zone D is 14 to 20 years of service, and Zone E is more than 20 years of service. Air Force Zone D is 14 years to under 18 years of service, and Zone E is 18 years to under 20 years of service.

The Army uses the same definitions for Zones A and B as the other three services above; however, for Zone C, the Army includes all enlisted personnel over 10 years of service.

The Marine Corps uses slightly different categories:

- **First term:** serving in first enlistment with more than 17 months and less than 6 years of service.
- **Subsequent:** second or subsequent enlistment, with less than 18 years of service.
- **Other:** Those with more than 18 years of service.

Table 1. Retention Goals and Results
Active Component Enlisted Personnel, FY2022-FY2024

Armed Service/ Retention Category	FY2022			FY2023			FY2024		
	Goal	Achieved	Percent of Goal	Goal	Achieved	Percent of Goal	Goal	Achieved	Percent of Goal
Army									
Zone A	26,321	27,111	103%	24,351	24,729	102%	26,811	29,154	109%
Zone B	19,506	20,296	104%	18,771	19,149	102%	18,098	22,330	123%
Zone C	10,107	10,897	108%	11,985	12,363	103%	9,791	11,052	113%
Navy									
Zone A	17,523	18,886	108%	18,210	21,371	117%	18,941	22,413	118%
Zone B	7,751	8,271	107%	8,107	7,890	97%	7,763	8,163	105%
Zone C	5,247	5,724	109%	5,506	5,914	107%	5,705	6,511	114%
Marine Corps									
First	5,820	5,918	102%	6,225	7,070	114%	6,950	7,953	114%
Subsequent	5,417	5,794	107%	5,632	5,942	106%	5,962	5,799	97%
Air Force									
Zone A	19,109	22,627	118%	18,185	23,102	127%	19,094	25,166	132%
Zone B	10,852	11,426	105%	12,117	12,170	100%	12,888	13,125	102%
Zone C	7,900	9,010	114%	7,874	9,189	117%	8,012	9,929	124%
Space Force									
Zone A	-	-	-	-	-	-	276	338	122%
Zone B	-	-	-	-	-	-	204	257	126%
Zone C	-	-	-	-	-	-	132	195	148%

Source: Department of Defense data provided to CRS as of October 29, 2024.

Note: Space Force data were included with the Air Force for FY2022 and FY2023.

Issues for Congress

Congressional interest in retention typically increases when an armed service fails to meet its goal for one or more retention zones by about 10% or more, and particularly if the shortfall continues over several years. Additionally, even if an armed service is meeting its goals by retention zones, Congress may nonetheless focus on retention shortfalls within specific occupational specialties (for example, health care professions or special operations) or for certain demographics.

The perceived cause of any such shortfalls is often of interest to Congress as well. For example, was the shortfall related to congressionally directed end-strength increases, which necessitated higher retention goals? Was it due to more attractive compensation packages in the private sector? Was it due to decreased job satisfaction? The perceived cause can affect interpretations of the shortfalls' significance and the options for remedying them.

Relevant Statutes

Title 10 U.S. Code, Chapter 31
Title 10 U.S. Code, Section 115

Other Resources

DOD Instruction 1332.45, Retention Determinations for Non-Deployable Service Members
DOD Instruction 1308.3, DOD Physical Fitness and Body Fat Programs Procedures
DOD Instruction 1304.29, Administration of Enlistment Bonuses, Accession Bonuses for New Officers in Critical Skills, Selective Reenlistment Bonuses, and Critical Skills Retention Bonuses for Active Members

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