

FY2025 NDAA: Active Component End-Strength

Updated September 30, 2025

Background

Under [10 U.S.C. §115\(a\)](#), Congress sets the maximum size of the active component of the Armed Forces annually, typically in the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). The active component comprises the full-time personnel of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, Coast Guard, and Space Force. Congress also appropriates funds for the pay and benefits of these personnel.

End-strength specifically refers to the actual number of personnel in a branch on the last day of the fiscal year (i.e., September 30). The enacted end-strength figures in the Servicemember Quality of Life Improvement and National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2025 (FY2025 NDAA; P.L. 118-159) are for September 30, 2025. Congress also periodically sets minimum end-strength levels for the Armed Forces, that may be identical to or lower than the authorized end-strength. While Congress authorizes minimum and maximum end-strengths, each military service manages its force, through recruiting and retention efforts, to achieve an actual end-strength.

Typically, actual end-strength falls within the congressionally authorized minimum and maximum end-strengths. However, there are circumstances in which the actual end-strength may fall outside the authorized range. For example, under [10 U.S.C. §115\(f\)](#), the Secretary of Defense (who is now using “Secretary of War” as a “secondary title” under [Executive Order](#) 14347 dated September 5, 2025) may—after determining “such action is in the national interest”—increase the end-strength of any of the services above the authorized end-strength by up to 3%. Recruiting and retention shortfalls may cause one or more of the services to fall below their minimum authorized strength.

Under [10 U.S.C. §113a\(b\)\(2\)](#), the Secretary of Defense is required to submit end-strength requests for all branches of the active component in an annual request to Congress. Congress is not bound by these requests but uses them as a point of departure for consideration of end-strength levels.

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

IN12449

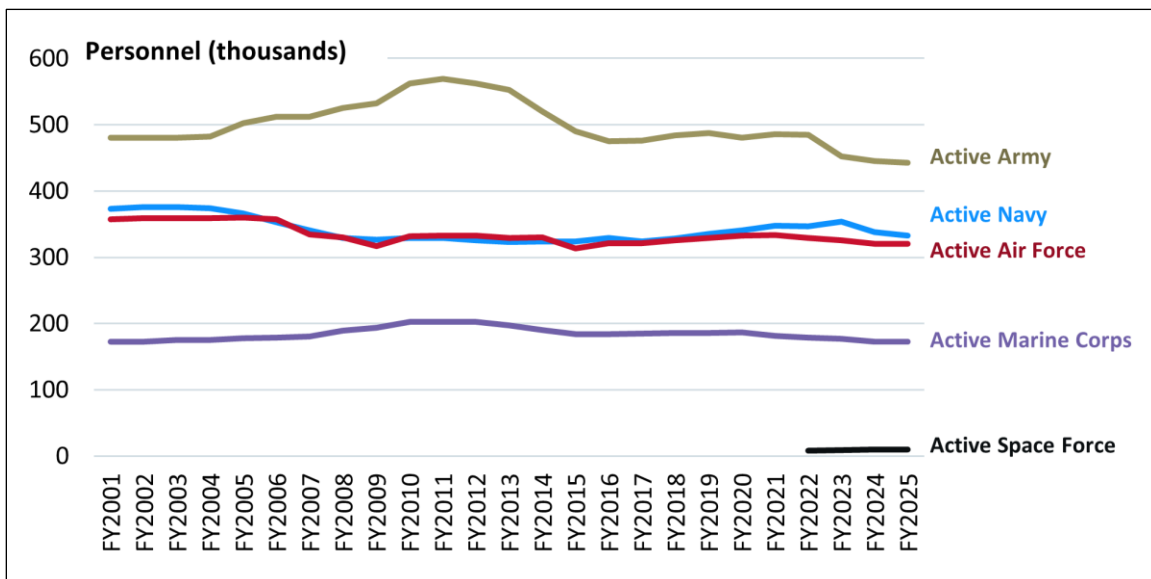
End-Strength Trends, FY2001-FY2025

Congress varies the authorized end-strengths over time in response to factors such as national security priorities, budget constraints, and recruitment challenges. For example, in enacting the FY2008 NDAA (P.L. 110-181), Congress authorized reduced Navy and Air Force end-strengths, and in a House report (H.Rept. 110-146) expressed concern over service proposals to retire legacy platforms and transfer certain roles to civilians. The report (S.Rept. 110-335) accompanying the Senate-passed [Duncan Hunter National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2009](#) (FY2009 NDAA, S. 3001) expressed the Committee’s support for “the Army and Marine Corps efforts to increase their active-duty end strength.” In the late 2010s and early 2020s, as U.S. commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan diminished, Congress reduced the Army’s end-strength and increased that of the Navy. Since the FY2022 NDAA (P.L. 117-81), Congress has authorized end-strength for the Space Force, whose personnel came largely from the Air Force (See [Figure 1](#)).

In the report (S.Rept. 118-58) accompanying the Senate Armed Services Committee-reported [National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024](#) (FY2024 NDAA, S. 2226 §401), the committee stated that it chose to recommend lower active end-strength than requested because “legislating unreachable end strength numbers would set the military services up for failure” by “encouraging quantity over quality in recruiting”. It remains unclear whether incremental reductions in previous years may have stemmed in part from this concern.

Figure 1. Active Component Authorized End-Strength FY2001–FY2025 Request

Figure is interactive in the HTML version of this Insight.



Source: CRS analysis of Congress.gov data and President’s Budget Request—from Department of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller).

Notes: FY2001-FY2024 data comprise authorized end-strengths from NDAA. FY2025 data are from President’s Budget Request. Space Force end-strength from FY2020 and FY2021 is included in the Air Force line. Coast Guard, part of the Department of Homeland Security, is not shown.

FY2025 NDAA

The Department of Defense (DOD—which is now “using a secondary Department of War designation,” under [Executive Order](#) 14347 dated September 5, 2025) decreased its FY2025 end-strength requests from FY2024 levels (see **Table 1**)—a decision for which it has offered several explanations. At a March 2024 [press conference](#), then-DOD Comptroller Michael J. McCord suggested that recruitment challenges, stemming from low unemployment, shaped FY2025 end-strength requests. Service officials also claimed that budget issues—a “[constrained topline](#)” in the Navy’s phrase—limited their ability to expand recruiting. The Army [cited](#) its need for “stable and predictable funding” and described impacts of a full year continuing resolution. In addition, while not referring explicitly to end-strength requests, DOD’s [FY2025 defense budget overview](#) stated that, in light of the [Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023](#) (P.L. 118-5), which capped annual defense discretionary spending at \$886.35 billion for FY2024 and \$895.21 billion for FY2025, the department “made difficult, but responsible, decisions that focus on maintaining our military’s readiness and taking care of our people.”

On December 23, 2024, former President Joe Biden signed the FY2025 NDAA into law. The FY2025 NDAA enacts active component end-strengths identical to those that DOD requested.

Table 1. FY2024 and FY2025 Active Component End-Strengths

Service	FY2024 Enacted End-Strength	FY2025 President's Budget Request	FY2025 Enacted End-Strength	Change from Enacted FY24-FY25
Army	445,000	442,300	442,300	-2,700
Navy	337,800	332,300	332,300	-5,500
Marine Corps	172,300	172,300	172,300	0
Air Force	320,000	320,000	320,000	0
Space Force	9,400	9,800	9,800	+400
Total	1,284,500	1,276,700	1,276,700	-7,800

Source: Congress.gov; Department of Defense (Department of War), Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller).

Issues for Congress

Congress may set policy priorities independent of the executive branch through legislation and oversight. As Congress considers a FY2026 NDAA, it may assess whether the Administration’s end-strength requests align with Congress’s defense policy objectives. A greater emphasis on artificial intelligence or uncrewed platforms, for example, could shift the funding balance between military personnel and procurement or research and development accounts.

Author Information

Nicholas M. Munves
Analyst in U.S. Defense Policy

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.