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Defense Primer: Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps

Background

The Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC) is a federally funded program of instruction for high school-aged students administered by the armed forces. The purpose of JROTC, according to 10 U.S.C. §2031 is “to instill in students in United States secondary educational institutions the values of citizenship, service to the United States (including an introduction to service opportunities in military, national, and public service), and personal responsibility and a sense of accomplishment.”

Congress established JROTC as an Army program in the National Defense Act of 1916 (P.L. 64-85), and in 1964 (P.L. 88-647) expanded it to the Navy and Air Force. Congress later authorized U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) JROTC units at two schools: one in Miami, FL in 1989 (P.L. 101-225), and another in Camden County, NC in 2005 (P.L. 109-241). Section 11247 of the James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year (FY) 2023 (P.L. 117-263) required the USCG to establish and maintain at least one JROTC Unit in every Coast Guard district by December 31, 2025. As of January 1, 2026, the USCG reported having existing or planned units in 8 of the 9 districts.

In FY2024, the military services reported 3,507 JROTC units, with programs in all 50 states and at Department of Defense Education Activity (DODEA) schools overseas (see **Table 1**). Eighth-grade students may participate in JROTC if physically co-located with 9th-12th grade students. Home-schooled students may also participate.

Table 1. Estimated Size of JROTC Program in FY2025

Service	Number of units	Estimated enrollment
Army	1,744	285,000
Navy	658	81,850
Marine Corps	248	29,000
Air Force	815	91,280
Space Force	10	1,100
Total	3,475	488,230

Source: FY2026 military department budget justification documents.

Notes: Navy figures include 75 National Defense Cadet Corps (NDCC) units and 5,450 NDCC cadets. Table does not include 14 USCG units.

JROTC Instructors

JROTC instructors are typically retired or reserve officers and enlisted noncommissioned officers (NCOs); 10 U.S.C. §2031(d)(1) also authorizes employment of active duty servicemembers and certain honorably discharged veterans. These instructors are hired as employees of the school

district, but also have oversight from the military services. Instructors are required to abide by standards set by their parent service, as well as the policies set by their host institution. Generally, schools with JROTC units employ a minimum of one officer (*Senior Military Instructor*) and one NCO (*Junior Military Instructor*) on staff. Eligibility criteria for JROTC instructors (e.g., education, certification, training) are specified in law (10 U.S.C. §2033).

Servicemembers who are eligible for retired pay may continue to receive such pay while employed as an instructor. Military departments subsidize instructor positions with appropriated funds by reimbursing the host institution for a portion of the salary using the *JROTC Standardized Instructor Pay Scale* (JSIPS).

Curriculum

JROTC courses are taught over a three- or four-year period on topics such as leadership, ethics, civics, history, and health and wellness. The FY2020 NDAA (P.L. 116-92) authorized instruction in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. JROTC also includes service-specific courses such as Aerospace Science or Seamanship and Navigation. In addition, units offer extracurricular activities such as color guard/drill team, marksmanship, and field trips to military installations.

Establishing a JROTC Program

Congressional offices may be approached by local educational authorities (LEAs) in their districts with questions about how to establish a new JROTC unit. Schools interested in hosting a unit must apply to the respective military department. Host schools are required to maintain participation levels of 10% of the student body, or 100 students, whichever is less. The military departments establish criteria for unit placement, including *Title I* status under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (P.L. 89-10, as amended), local indicators of need (e.g., high unemployment or illiteracy), student enrollment, school financial solvency, and fair and equitable distribution of JROTC programs among states.

Schools may also apply to host or convert an existing JROTC unit to a National Defense Cadet Corps (NDCC) per 10 U.S.C. §2035. NDCC statutory and regulatory requirements are similar to host a JROTC unit. However, instructor salaries and other costs for NDCCs are the responsibility of the host institution and are not subsidized by the federal government. Schools may seek to convert an existing unit to an unfunded NDCC if enrollment figures fall under the statutory threshold.

Federal Funding

Congress typically appropriates JROTC funds annually as part of the armed services' Operation and Maintenance

(O&M) and Military Personnel (MILPERS) budgets (see **Table 2**). Instructor salaries constitute the largest proportion of spending; appropriations also cover uniforms, cadet travel, training aids, text books, educational materials, and other unit operating expenses. Host institutions provide classroom space, facilities, and administrative support.

Table 2. Funding for JROTC, FY2025
(Enacted total funding, in thousands of dollars)

Service	O&M	MILPERS	Total
Army	206,163	34,660	240,823
Navy	59,649	18,632	78,281
Marine Corps	29,631	3,930	33,561
Air Force	74,659	21,922	96,581
Total	370,102	79,144	449,246

Source: FY2026 military department budget justification documents. Space Force funding is included in Air Force figures.

Considerations for Congress

How many JROTC units should Congress fund?

In determining the number of JROTC units to support, Congress may consider defense budget priorities, program benefits, and host school and constituent concerns. Congress has established statutory minimum and maximum limits on the number of JROTC units that have varied over time. Under 10 U.S.C. §2031, as amended in 2023 (P.L. 118-31 §551), DOD is required to maintain not fewer than 3,400 and not more than 4,000 units. In 2020, the congressionally mandated National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service recommended expanding the number of JROTC units to 6,000 by 2031.

What are some of the program benefits?

The JROTC program may offer certain benefits for students and host schools. Several studies have found positive correlations between JROTC participation and student outcomes, including school attendance and graduation rates, improved test performance, higher self-esteem for female students, and lower rates of disciplinary action. For schools, the prospect of federal funding for instructors, STEM program grants (P.L. 116-283 §512), and other activities may create incentives to host and maintain units. Some critics maintain that these incentives may lead schools to pressure students into enrolling in JROTC to maintain the unit sizes required for continued funding.

How does JROTC participation affect recruiting?

Some parents and observers have expressed concerns about military influence in high schools. Participation in JROTC does not incur any military obligation and recruitment is not a stated objective in statute or policy. Nevertheless, the services seek to provide favorable exposure to military careers through JROTC and the program has potential to increase the propensity for military service. Some researchers have found a positive correlation between JROTC participation and propensity to enlist, while others have found that the impact of participation on military enlistment is negligible when accounting for self-selection

into JROTC. JROTC participation has been linked with positive outcomes for those who do go on to enlist in the military. Some effects vary by gender and racial/ethnic groups.

JROTC participants who pursue enlistment or appointment as an officer may benefit at the time of entry into service. Per military policy (DODI 1205.13), a student successfully completing at least two academic years of the JROTC program is entitled to advanced promotion to the grade of no less than E-2 upon initial enlistment. The military departments may award the grade of E-3 for successful completion of three academic years. The military department secretaries may also nominate up to 20 honor graduates from JROTC units designated as *honor schools* for appointment to the military service academies.

How should units be distributed?

The 1964 authorization of JROTC programs under 10 U.S.C. §2031 required “fair and equitable” distribution of units throughout the nation. This requirement was removed in the FY2024 NDAA (P.L. 118-31 §551). The demographic, socioeconomic, and geographic distribution of JROTC units remains a salient consideration for Congress.

Past analysis from 2017 found that JROTC is underrepresented in rural and remote areas and over-represented in the South Atlantic states (i.e., FL, GA, NC, SC, and LA) relative to the national average. The report also found that public and urban high schools with larger-than-average minority populations or serving economically disadvantaged populations are also overrepresented as JROTC host schools. Higher representation in these schools is related to service-level policy decisions that award preference for economically disadvantaged Title I-designated schools and other structural program requirements (e.g., minimum student participation, availability of instructors).

Congress might weigh these distributional issues against projected sustainability of units, constituent/stakeholder interests, and other military policy priorities.

Other JROTC Oversight Matters

Additional oversight matters related to JROTC include, 1) quality and accuracy of curriculum and instruction materials, 2) instructor recruitment and pay, and 3) accountability for JROTC instructor performance and behavior.

Resources

Chapter 102, Title 10, *United States Code*: Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps
DODI 1205.13, Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps' Program.

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