

FY2026 NDAA: Active Component End-Strength

February 6, 2026

Background

Under [10 USC § 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 National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2026 (FY2026 NDAA, P.L. 119-60) are for September 30, 2026. 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 USC § 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.

End-Strength Trends, FY2001-FY2026

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

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

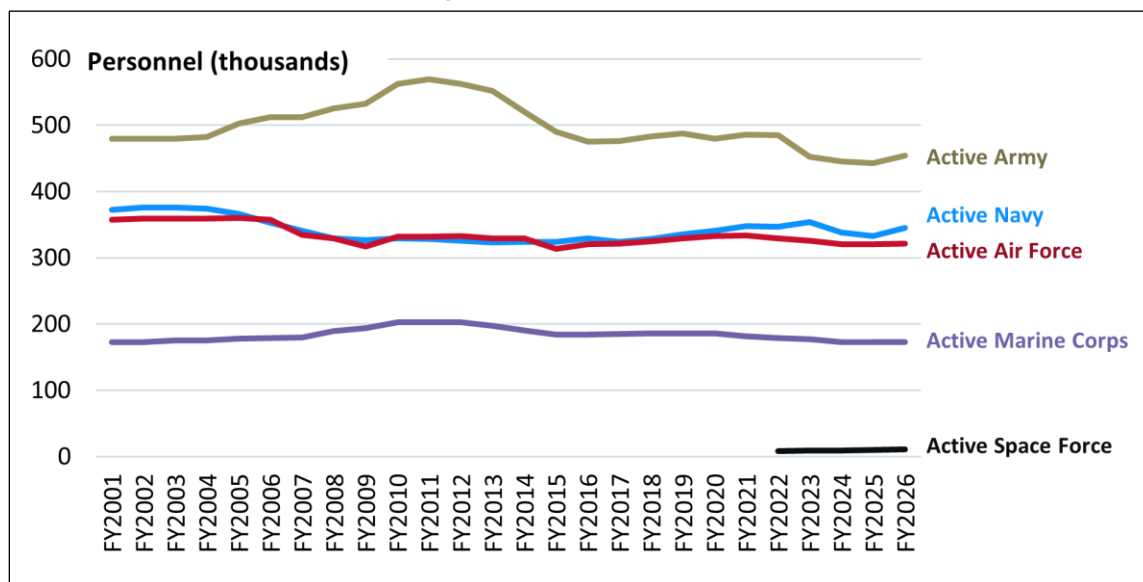
IN12651

(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-FY2026

Figure is interactive in HTML



Source: CRS analysis of Congress.gov data and President’s Budget Requests—from Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller) for FY2001–FY2026.

Notes: FY2001–FY2026 data comprise authorized end-strengths from NDAA. 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.

FY2026 NDAA

The Department of Defense (DOD—which is now “using a secondary Department of War designation,” under Executive Order 14347 dated September 5, 2025) increased its FY2026 active-component end-strength request by 26,100 over FY2025 authorized levels. DOD stated that “[the Department’s force structure investments support the Interim National Defense Strategic Guidance to size and shape the Joint Force under an America First agenda to restore peace through strength.](#)”

On December 18, 2025, President Trump signed the FY2026 NDAA into law (P.L. 119-60), which enacted the end-strengths outlined in the President’s budget request. This law enacts the end-strengths requested by the Secretary of Defense (see **Table 1**).

Table 1. FY2025 and FY2026 Active-Component End-Strengths

Service	FY2025 Enacted End-Strength	FY2026 President’s Budget Request	FY2026 Enacted End-Strength	Change from Enacted FY2025-FY2026
Army	442,300	454,000	454,000	+11,700
Navy	332,300	344,600	344,600	+12,300
Air Force	320,000	321,500	321,500	+1,500
Marine Corps	172,300	172,300	172,300	+0
Space Force	9,800	10,400	10,400	+600
Total	1,276,700	1,302,800	1,302,800	+26,100

Source: [Congress.gov](https://www.congress.gov); Department of Defense (Department of War), [Office of the Under Secretary of Defense \(Comptroller\)](#). Coast Guard, part of the Department of Homeland Security, is not shown.

Issues for Congress

During FY2026, Congress may conduct oversight of the services’ efforts to meet the end-strength targets enacted in the FY2026 NDAA.

As Congress considers an FY2027 NDAA, it may assess whether the Executive Branch’s end-strength requests align with Congress’s defense policy objectives.

Issues Congress may consider when evaluating future end-strength requests include

- Do these requests reflect a realistic assessment of the services’ ability to recruit and retain personnel?
- Do these requests reflect the services’ manpower requirements? Do they address manpower shortages, such as [those of the Navy](#)?
- Do the Navy’s end-strength requests fulfill potential manpower requirements for the “[Golden Fleet](#)”?
- Can the services realistically achieve [recruit quality goals](#) while pursuing the requested end-strengths?
- Do these requests align with service-level force restructuring initiatives, such as those underway in the [Army](#) and [Marine Corps](#)?
- Do these requests reflect an optimum active component / reserve component force mix?
- Do these requests reflect national security priorities, as defined by Congress, the Executive Branch, or both?
- Do these requests reflect priorities outlined in the [National Security Strategy](#) (NSS), [National Defense Strategy](#) (NDS), or other documents?
- Have the services achieved enacted end-strengths in previous years?
- Does Congress have sufficient information to conduct effective oversight of DOD’s efforts to formulate and achieve end-strength goals?

Congress may enact end-strengths that differ from, or are identical to, DOD’s requests.

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.