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Defense Primer: Active Component Enlisted Recruiting

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 interest in military recruiting, which is critical to maintaining a fully manned and capable volunteer military workforce. Congress exercises a powerful influence on recruiting through its establishment of personnel end-strength levels for the Active and Reserve Components. Higher end-strengths generally require more new recruits, higher rates of retention among current servicemembers, or some combination of the two. Through its oversight powers, Congress monitors the performance of the executive branch in managing the size and quality of the military workforce. Congress influences the achievement of recruiting goals by the armed services in several ways:

- authorizing military compensation packages that are competitive with civilian employers (e.g., basic pay, education, housing, and health benefits);
- establishing criteria that affect eligibility for enlistment such as age, cognitive, behavioral, and citizenship requirements; and
- funding recruiting programs that provide for dedicated recruiters, market research, advertising, and military entrance processing stations.

Successful recruiting often depends on identifying a population that is *eligible* and has a *propensity* for enlistment. The policy levers commonly used to address recruiting issues include increased funding for additional recruiters, advertising, and enlistment incentives (e.g., bonuses, education benefits). When recruiting shortfalls occur, or are anticipated, Congress may elect to apply additional resources to these mechanisms. Likewise, when recruiting is expected to be strong, Congress may elect to shift resources away from these areas. Congress might also consider nonmonetary initiatives that reduce barriers to enlistment or otherwise increase the pool of eligible individuals (e.g., waivers, process improvements).

Recruiting

Without a robust ability to bring new personnel into the military, the armed services could lack sufficient manpower to carry out mission essential tasks in the near term. Moreover, without stable recruiting levels they could lack a sufficient pool of entry-level personnel to develop into the mid-level and upper-level leaders of the future. To maintain a healthy military force structure, each armed service sets goals for new personnel *accessions* each fiscal year for both its Active and Reserve Components. Officer and enlisted goals are set separately. For enlisted personnel, there are both *quantity* and *quality* goals.

Quantity Goals

Quantity goals are typically based on each armed service's projected need for new personnel (both officer and enlisted) over the course of the year to meet its congressionally authorized end-strength.

Enlisted quantity goals are based on the proportion of congressionally authorized end-strength that a service and component allocates to its enlisted force, less the number of current enlisted personnel it expects to retain through the end of the year. The actual number of new enlistees needed may also change during the year as new projections are made about the retention of currently serving enlisted personnel, or if the armed service must increase or decrease the total size of its force (for example, if a Service Secretary were to exercise the authority of 10 U.S.C. §115(g)(1)(A) to increase congressionally authorized active duty end-strength for that armed service by up to 2%). **Table 1** lists recruit quantity goals and results for FY2024-FY2026. For FY2026, all services met or exceeded their quantitative goals.

Quality Goals

Quality goals for *non-prior service* (NPS) recruits are established through law and policy. The armed services use two principal quality benchmarks apply to NPS recruits. The first is the percentage of NPS enlistees who graduate from high school. The second is the percentage of scores above average on the Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT Categories I-IIIA). Military policy stipulates that at least 90% of NPS enlistees must have high school diplomas and at least 60% must score above average on the AFQT. Supplementary ways to assess the quality of enlistment cohorts include the percentage of NPS enlistees who score well-below average on the AFQT (Category IV), and the number and types of enlistment waivers granted for medical reasons, misconduct, or drug use. Law (10 U.S.C. §520) stipulates that no more than 4% of an annual enlistment cohort may be Category IV (10th-30th percentile on the AFQT). However, the 4% threshold may be increased to 20% at the request of the Secretary, with congressional notification. Department policy specifies that those who score in Category V (1st-9th percentile on the AFQT) are ineligible to enlist. **Table 2** and **Table 3** list recruit quality benchmarks and results for FY2024-FY2026. The Army failed to meet its 60% AQFT threshold in FY2026 for the second year in a row. All other services reported meeting quality benchmarks in FY2026.

Table 1. Non-Prior Service Accessions Data (Quantity)
Active Component Enlisted Personnel, FY2024-FY2026

Armed Service	FY2024			FY2025			FY2026		
	Goal	Achieved	Percent of Goal	Goal	Achieved	Percent of Goal	Goal	Achieved	Percent of Goal
Army	55,000	55,150	100.3%	61,000	62,050	101.7%	61,500	61,529	100.1%
Navy	40,600	35,804	88.2%	40,600	44,096	108.6%	45,000	45,112	100.3%
Marine Corps	27,500	27,500	100.0%	26,600	26,600	100.0%	27,000	27,000	100.0%
Air Force	27,200	27,303	100.4%	30,100	30,166	100.2%	32,100	32,124	100.1%
Space Force	704	716	101.7%	796	819	102.9%	730	761	104.3%

Source: Department of Defense (DOD) Action Memo on file with author. DOD is using a secondary Department of War (DOW) designation under Executive Order 14347 dated September 5, 2025.

Table 2. Non-Prior Service Accessions Data (Quality—High School Diploma Graduates)
Active Component Enlisted Personnel, FY2024-FY2026

Armed Service	DOD Benchmark	Achieved FY2024	Achieved FY2025	Achieved FY2026
Army	90%	94.5%	95.0%	95.1%
Navy	90%	95.4%	93.6%	94.5%
Marine Corps	90%	97.9%	98.1%	98.7%
Air Force	90%	98.6%	98.7%	98.7%
Space Force	90%	99.9%	99.9%	99.3%

Source: Department of Defense Action Memo on file with author.

Table 3. Non-Prior Service Accessions Data (Quality – Above Average AFQT Score)
Active Component Enlisted Personnel, FY2024-FY2026

Armed Service	DOD Benchmark	Achieved FY2024	Achieved FY2025	Achieved FY2026
Army	60%	60.3%	56.5%	58.2%
Navy	60%	54.2%	60.5%	63.6%
Marine Corps	60%	64.0%	64.2%	67.1%
Air Force	60%	80.1%	79.5%	81.8%
Space Force	60%	99.3%	98.9%	98.7%

Source: Department of Defense Action Memo on file with author. **Notes:** AFQT is the Armed Forces Qualification Test.

DOD Resources

DOD Instruction 1304.26, Qualification Standards for Enlistment, Appointment, and Induction

DOD Instruction 1145.01, Qualitative Distribution of Military Manpower

DOW Instruction 6130.03, Vol. 1, Medical Standards for Military Service: Appointment, Enlistment or Induction

DOD Instruction 1304.32, Military Services Recruiting Related Reports

Defense Manpower Data Center, DOD Personnel, Workforce Reports, and Publications

Relevant Statutes

Title 10, Chapter 31, of the *U.S. Code*

10 U.S.C. §115

10 U.S.C. §520

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