

GAO

Report to the Chairman and the Ranking  
Minority Member, Subcommittee on  
Personnel, Committee on Armed  
Services, U.S. Senate

---

September 1998

# MILITARY ATTRITION

Better Data, Coupled  
With Policy Changes,  
Could Help the  
Services Reduce Early  
Separations



---

---



**United States  
General Accounting Office  
Washington, D.C. 20548**

---

**National Security and  
International Affairs Division**

B-280587

September 15, 1998

The Honorable Dirk Kempthorne  
Chairman  
The Honorable Max Cleland  
Ranking Minority Member  
Subcommittee on Personnel  
Committee on Armed Services  
United States Senate

This report responds to the Subcommittee's request that we analyze historical attrition rates for enlisted personnel who serve at least 6 months but leave military service before completing their first contract terms. Specifically, we determined (1) the rate and timing of attrition during enlistees' first terms, (2) the extent of the Department of Defense's investment in recruiting and training first-term enlistees, (3) reasons for first-term attrition after training, (4) servicemembers' perceptions of quality-of-life factors that contribute to attrition, and (5) actions the Department of Defense and the services are taking to reduce enlistees' attrition.

We are sending copies of this report to the Secretaries of Defense, the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force and the Commandant of the Marine Corps. We will also make copies available to others upon request.

Please contact me at (202) 512-5140 if you or your staff have any questions concerning this report. Other major contributors to this report are listed in appendix IV.

Mark E. Gebicke  
Director, Military Operations and  
Capabilities Issues

---

# Executive Summary

---

## Purpose

In January 1997, GAO reported that each year, around 25,000 enlisted personnel are being separated from the services in their first 6 months, during or shortly after they complete basic training.<sup>1</sup> The Chairman and the Ranking Minority Member of the Senate Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Personnel, asked that GAO similarly analyze historical attrition rates for enlisted personnel who serve at least 6 months but leave military service before completing their first contract terms. Specifically, GAO determined (1) the rate and timing of attrition during enlistees' first terms, (2) the extent of the Department of Defense's (DOD) investment in recruiting and training first-term enlistees, (3) reasons for first-term attrition after training, (4) servicemembers' perceptions of quality-of-life factors that contribute to attrition, and (5) actions DOD and the services are taking to reduce enlistees' attrition. GAO also agreed to provide attrition data for enlistees by educational background, Armed Forces Qualification Test score, age at enlistment, gender, and race/ethnic group (see app. I).

---

## Background

The military services recruit hundreds of thousands of new enlistees each year. Over the course of their careers, enlistees sign contracts that define their length of service for the duration of each contract. For the first term of service, these contracts generally cover between 2 and 6 years, with the typical contract being for 4 years. While most enlistees complete the terms of their first contract, many fail to do so. These persons are counted as "attrition" and are separated from military service. The reasons for separation vary and are documented in official discharge papers through the use of separation program designator codes. The Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC) is responsible for maintaining data on the attrition rates of servicemembers.

While GAO developed historical attrition data, it focused its detailed analysis of attrition rates and the reasons for attrition on enlistees who entered the services in fiscal year 1993 in order to track all enlistees up to 48 months later, or fiscal year 1997 (the latest year for which data was available). These enlistees consisted of about 203,000 personnel, including about 175,000 men and 28,000 women. Of this group, 72,670 did not complete their first terms. GAO also interviewed a judgmental sample of 254 first-term enlistees and 41 supervisors to gain insight into underlying causes for attrition.

---

<sup>1</sup>Military Attrition: DOD Could Save Millions by Better Screening Enlisted Personnel (GAO/NSIAD-97-39, Jan. 6, 1997).

---

## Results in Brief

First-term attrition has been a long-standing and complex problem for the services. While all four services are concerned about attrition, they have made few formal policy changes aimed at reducing attrition in specific target populations. Although the services collect survey data to assess attitudes about military service and quality of life, they do not use this data to analyze why separations are occurring or to formulate policy changes or actions aimed at reducing early attrition.

Between fiscal year 1982-93, 31.7 percent of all enlistees did not complete their first terms of service: 11 percent of enlistees were separated during their first 6 months, and 20.7 percent between their 7th and 48th month. For Army, Navy, and Air Force enlistees who entered the services in fiscal year 1993, attrition rates were higher than they had been in over a decade. These reported attrition rates would be even higher if they included all persons who did not complete their first terms. DOD's data on attrition does not include all enlistees allowed to separate early from the military, for example, to allow the services to meet mandated personnel levels or to allow enlistees to attend school. First-term attrition is costly in that DOD now estimates the services' recruiting and training investment in each enlistee during the first term at an average of \$35,532. Recruiting and training cost estimates were somewhat lower in fiscal year 1993. Using the fiscal year 1993 cost estimates, GAO calculates that the services spent \$1.3 billion on the 72,670 enlistees who entered the services in fiscal year 1993 and departed prematurely. Because these enlistees were separated early, the services did not get a full return on their investment.

Official reasons for the separation of enlistees who entered the services in fiscal year 1993 varied by gender and by service. For example, higher percentages of enlisted men than women were separated for misconduct, drugs, and alcoholism. On the other hand, the leading reason given for female attrition was pregnancy, and higher percentages of enlisted women were separated for medical conditions, performance problems, and parenthood. The Marine Corps separated a greater percentage of enlistees for medical problems than the other services did; the Army separated a higher percentage for performance problems; and the Marine Corps and the Navy separated higher percentages for drug use. Variances in the types of separations among the services indicate that the services interpret separation codes differently, that their separation policies differ, that the services have very different attrition problems, or some combination of these explanations. In its 1997 report on attrition from basic training, GAO recommended ways for DOD to improve the use of these separation codes to build a more complete database on reasons for servicewide attrition.

GAO's recommendations have been incorporated into the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1998 (P.L. 105-85), and DOD has begun to comply with these legislative requirements. GAO's current work reaffirms the need for the consistent use of separation codes. During interviews with 254 first-term enlistees and 41 supervisors, most mentioned quality-of-life issues as drivers of first-term attrition. Although all the services survey their personnel on quality-of-life issues, these surveys are not targeted to first-term enlistees or used to determine underlying reasons that this particular group may be seeking ways out of completing their contract terms.

All four services are concerned about attrition, and the Army and the Air Force have set numerical targets for reducing it. Two studies indicate that positive leadership—such as the command emphasis now being placed on attrition—can result in an increase in the percentage of enlisted personnel who complete their first-term contracts. However, GAO found that the services did not always have adequate data on the exact reasons for separation and had only rarely made formal policy changes directed at populations the services wished to target for remedial action. Without such data and formal policy changes, numerical targets will be arbitrary, and success in reducing attrition may either be coincidental or result in the failure to discharge enlistees who really should be separated. The Army's recent policy change to no longer allow persons to separate voluntarily because of performance problems illustrates the benefit of targeting a specific group for remedial action. Namely, the Army can now document how many enlistees it has rehabilitated and why. Finally, allowing many enlistees to easily separate with honorable discharges may inadvertently serve as a disincentive for them to persevere.

---

## Principal Findings

---

### About 21 Percent of Enlistees Are Separated After Training

Data maintained by DMDC indicates that over the past 12 years, the attrition rate of enlistees who did not complete their first terms of service averaged 31.7 percent: 11 percent left before they had completed 6 months of service, and 20.7 percent left after 6 months, when most had completed training. For Navy, Air Force, and Army enlistees who entered the services in fiscal year 1993, attrition rates were higher than they had been in over a decade. The Navy's rate was 35.8 percent; the Air Force's was 32.5 percent; and the Army's was 39.3 percent. The Marine Corps' rate was 31.5 percent,

continuing a 3-year decline that began in fiscal year 1990. For all services' 202,908 enlistees in fiscal year 1993, 72,670 did not complete their first terms of service. Of those who left, 45,046 personnel were discharged between their 7th and 48th month.

DOD does not have complete data on the magnitude of its attrition losses because currently reported attrition rates do not include all enlistees who were voluntarily released from the services before the end of their first terms. The services' standard policy has been that enlistees are not to be released more than 90 days before their contract terms are due to expire. However, during downsizing, all services allowed some first-term personnel to separate much earlier. The Air Force and the Navy released large numbers of persons early to meet mandated end strengths, among other reasons. Not all of these early releases were counted as attrition. Though voluntary early release programs might have been cost-effective downsizing tools, such early releases clearly result in a loss in the services' significant recruiting and training investment.

DMDC data indicates that for enlistees who entered the services in fiscal year 1993, the Navy separated 2,943 persons more than 90 days before the end of their first contract terms. The Air Force separated 1,095 enlistees more than 90 days early. Adding these separated enlistees to the Navy's overall attrition rate of 35.8 percent increases it by 4.7 percentage points to 40.5 percent and likewise increases the Air Force's rate of 32.5 percent by 3.5 percentage points to 36 percent.

---

### Services Received Only a Partial Return on Their Investment in the Recruiting and Training of Enlistees

Separating thousands of enlistees early means that the services receive only a partial return on the significant investment they make in recruiting and training these enlistees. According to DOD, in fiscal year 1993, the average cost of recruiting and training each enlistee ranged from \$19,143 to \$24,885, depending on the service. Using these figures, GAO estimates that the services invested \$1.3 billion in the 72,670 enlistees who joined the services in fiscal year 1993 and did not complete their first contract terms. According to a DOD official, about two-thirds, or \$0.8 billion, of this cost was for enlistee salaries.

Updated figures provided by DOD indicate that recruiting and training costs have risen since fiscal year 1993. In fiscal year 1998, the average cost of recruiting an enlistee was \$6,732, and the average cost of training was an additional \$28,800, for a total of \$35,532. This entire cost is invested in enlistees as they are recruited and during their basic and initial training.

---

That is, this investment is generally made during an enlistee's first 6 months of service. Only after enlistees have been assigned to jobs do the services begin to receive returns on their investment.

These figures include the cost of the entire recruiting and training infrastructure, and it is therefore not feasible to expect to save \$35,532 for each enlistee who is not separated. However, these figures demonstrate the magnitude of the cost of recruiting and training hundreds of thousands of new recruits each year and the loss to the services when attrition rates are high. It would be expected that if there were a significant reduction in attrition, the recruiting and training infrastructure could be reduced, resulting in major savings.

---

### Official Reasons for Separation Vary by Gender and by Service

Official separation codes provide general categories of discharge, but they record only one of many possible reasons for separation. These separation codes indicate that over 70 percent of men in this group were separated for misconduct, medical conditions, performance problems, or drug use. Over 71 percent of women in this group were separated for pregnancy, medical problems, misconduct, performance problems, or parenthood.

Collecting better data on why enlistees are being separated is key to the services' ability to craft policies that increase the proportion of first-term personnel who complete their contractual obligations. In a 1997 report on attrition from basic training, GAO made recommendations to DOD and the services on ways to improve the use of separation codes to build a database for DOD to manage attrition. These recommendations were included in the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1998 (P.L. 105-85), and DOD is now working to implement them. GAO's current work reaffirms the need for such a servicewide database on reasons for separation. Differences in the types of separation by service continue to suggest that the services have different separation policies, that they have different attrition problems, that they are still inconsistently interpreting separation codes, or some combination of these three explanations. For example, separations for medical, performance, and drug problems varied widely by service. For enlistees who entered the services in fiscal year 1993, 34.2 percent of all Marine Corps separations were for medical problems, but this category represented only 16.1 percent of Navy separations, 10.2 percent of Army separations, and 5.8 percent of Air Force separations. While 26.6 percent of all Army discharges were for performance problems, the Air Force had only 7.2 percent in this category, the Marine Corps 1.2 percent, and the Navy 0.5 percent. The Navy and the

Marine Corps discharged higher percentages of first-term personnel for drug use. This type of discharge represented 14.2 percent of all Marine Corps separations, 13.9 percent of all Navy separations, but only 3.6 percent for the Air Force and 3 percent for the Army.

At present, the services have insufficient data to determine whether some of the enlistees now being separated represent groups that could be targeted for remedial action. Examples include persons who are now being separated for committing minor disciplinary infractions, failing physical fitness or career development tests, or being one-time drug users. Neither do the services have data indicating whether policies allowing women to voluntarily separate when they become pregnant are cost-effective. The Army and the Air Force allow pregnant women to voluntarily separate upon request, while the Marine Corps and the Navy leave the decision on whether to separate the enlistee up to the local commanders.

---

### Quality-of-Life Issues May Be Underlying Causes of Early Separation

During interviews with 254 first-term enlistees and 41 supervisors, GAO was told that the official reasons listed for separation may not accurately reflect the true reasons that enlistees separate early. In fact, quality-of-life issues may lie at the root of many separations. These issues include a perceived erosion of medical and retirement benefits, advancement opportunities, and pay, coupled with long hours and difficult and frequent deployments. GAO found that, while none of the services currently conducts exit surveys to enlisted personnel, they all administer surveys that include questions on servicemembers' perceptions of their quality of life.

Data now available on the quality-of-life issues underlying attrition is not tied to the services' efforts to prevent the attrition of first-term enlistees. If the services could use the data they collect from their several surveys on the quality of military life to prioritize first-term enlistees' concerns, they could focus their attention on improvements that would have the most impact on reducing attrition.

---

### Services Have Made Few Formal Policy Changes to Target Enlistees They Wish to Consider for Remedial Action After Training

For more than a decade, the first-term attrition rate has remained at about the same level. During this time, the services have targeted their recruiting efforts toward enlisting high school diploma graduates who score in the upper half of the Armed Forces Qualification Test because they have lower attrition rates than recruits without these qualifications. This group

continues to show lower attrition rates than other recruit groups. However, because the overwhelming majority of all recruits are now high school graduates with high aptitude scores, the services must turn their efforts to finding ways to get more high-quality enlistees to complete their first terms.

All services have expressed their concern about first-term attrition, and the Army and the Air Force have set numerical goals for reducing it. However, while research supports the positive effect of such command emphasis on reducing attrition, GAO believes that setting numerical goals for reducing attrition without complete information on its underlying causes or guidance on what specific actions should be taken to reduce it may turn these goals into arbitrary ceilings.

While the services have emphasized the importance of reducing attrition, they have rarely accompanied this emphasis with guidance to their commanders on what accommodations could be made to target certain categories of enlistees or on what actions should be taken to deal with identified problems after training. One effort that did include such a formal policy change targeting a particular group of enlistees demonstrates the effectiveness of this practice: the Army's recent decision to no longer allow enlistees to voluntarily separate because of problems with performance. In deciding to no longer routinely permit such voluntary separations, the Army has been able to assess what impact this policy change has had on this population.

GAO's interviews with first-term enlistees, supervisors, and service officials indicate that there may be certain groups of enlistees who could be targeted for remedial action. For example, enlistees who commit minor disciplinary infractions, who fail physical fitness or career development tests, who are one-time drug users, or who become pregnant may simply need to be provided further counseling, optional testing, other job choices, or remedial training by their commissioned or noncommissioned officers.

Lastly, granting honorable discharges to enlistees who deliberately seek ways out of fulfilling their service commitments may simply encourage others to do likewise. One Army unit GAO visited had already begun to attempt to close these "escape routes" and impose more punitive measures against certain enlistees, particularly those found to use drugs. GAO believes that some enlistees could be motivated to remain in the service if they knew that there were no easy ways out of their contracts and that

---

there were serious negative consequences associated with behavior or performance that warranted discharge.

---

## Recommendations

GAO recommends that the Secretary of Defense direct the service secretaries to take the following actions:

- When reporting first-term attrition rates, include as a separate category the numbers of first-term personnel released more than 90 days before the end of their contract terms.
- Use existing quality-of-life surveys or create new ones to (1) collect information on the factors contributing to first-term enlistees' separation and (2) identify quality-of-life initiatives aimed at reducing the attrition of first-term personnel.
- Continually emphasize to all commissioned and noncommissioned officers the costs of first-term attrition, the difficulty of acquiring new enlistees to replace early losses, and the importance of providing positive leadership in targeting first-term enlistees who could be encouraged to complete their contractual obligations.
- Collect more complete data on specific groups of enlistees whom the services wish to target for remedial action and issue guidance and formal policy changes to local commanders indicating what specific actions—such as more counseling, optional testing, further job choices, or remedial training—can be taken to prevent the early discharge of these targeted groups. Possibilities for targeting include enlistees now being separated for minor disciplinary infractions, failure to pass physical fitness tests and career development tests, one-time drug use, and pregnancy.
- Reassess the appropriateness of providing favorable types of discharge to enlistees whose behavior or performance led to their early separation and ensure that proper incentives exist to encourage enlistees to complete their first terms.

---

## Agency Comments

In commenting on a draft of this report, DOD concurred with GAO's findings and recommendations. (DOD's comments are presented in their entirety in app. III.) DOD agreed to direct the services to (1) review their 90-day release policies and the exceptions granted to those policies, (2) prepare a report on quality-of-life issues that could be addressed to reduce attrition, (3) provide local commanders with guidance and formal policy changes related to specific types of attrition the services target for remedial action, (4) reassess the appropriateness of providing favorable types of discharges to enlistees whose behavior or performance led to their early separation to

---

**Executive Summary**

---

ensure that proper incentives exist to encourage enlistees to complete their first terms, and (5) prepare a report by October 1999 documenting service initiatives related to GAO's recommendations.

---

---

---

# Contents

---

<b>Executive Summary</b>		2
<b>Chapter 1</b>		16
<b>Introduction</b>	Attrition Rate Is the Percentage of Enlistees Who Do Not Complete Their Contractual Obligations	16
	Composition of Enlistees Who Entered the Services in Fiscal Year 1993	16
	Our Previous Work in the Area of Attrition and Recruiting Objectives, Scope, and Methodology	17 18
<b>Chapter 2</b>		22
<b>High First-Term Attrition Results in a Reduced Return on the Services' Recruiting and Training Investment</b>	Attrition Rates Have Been Fairly Stable Over the Past Decade, but Fiscal Year 1993 Data Shows a Slight Increase	22
	Overall Attrition Rates Do Not Include All Early Releases	25
	Services' Investment in the Recruiting and Training of Enlistees Who Entered in Fiscal Year 1993 and Separated Early Totals \$1.3 Billion	27
<b>Chapter 3</b>		29
<b>Official Reasons for Early Separations</b>	Official Reasons for Separation Vary by Gender	29
	Official Reasons for Separation Vary by Service	33
	Differing Interpretations of Separation Codes and Policies May Explain Service Differences in Reasons for Discharge	39
<b>Chapter 4</b>		46
<b>Quality-of-Life Issues Appear to Be Demotivators for Completing Contractual Obligations for Military Service</b>	Perception Is That Military Benefits Are Eroding or Are Not Competitive With the Private Sector	46
	Further Career Opportunities Are Desired	46
	Deployment Schedules Can Be Motivators or Demotivators	47
	Perception Is That Married Enlistees Receive Preferential Treatment	47
	Results of Quality-of-Life Surveys Are Not Directly Tied to Efforts to Reduce First-Term Attrition	48

<hr/>		
<b>Chapter 5</b> <b>Services' Actions to</b> <b>Reduce First-Term</b> <b>Attrition</b>	The Services' Targeting of High School Graduates With High	50
	Aptitude Test Scores Has Met Its Limit in Controlling Attrition	50
	Services Have Made Few Formal Policy Changes to Reduce	51
	Attrition After Training	51
	Evidence Shows That Positive Leadership May Result in Lower	54
Attrition	54	
Services Do Not Provide Sufficiently Punitive Discharges to	56	
Prevent Enlistees From Seeking Separation	56	
<hr/>		
<b>Chapter 6</b> <b>Conclusions and</b> <b>Recommendations</b>	Recommendations	57
	Agency Comments and Our Evaluation	59
		60
<hr/>		
<b>Appendixes</b>	Appendix I: Attrition Rates by Demographics	62
	Appendix II: Attrition Rates by Occupation	64
	Appendix III: Comments From the Department of Defense	72
	Appendix IV: Major Contributors to This Report	75
<hr/>		
<b>Tables</b>	Table 2.1: Percentage of Enlisted Personnel Who Were Separated	23
	Before Their 48th Month of Service	23
	Table 2.2: Enlistees Who Entered the Services in Fiscal Year 1993	27
	and Were Released More Than 90 Days Early During Fiscal Years	27
	1993-97	27
	Table 3.1: Principal Reasons That Men Who Entered the Services	30
	in Fiscal Year 1993 Were Separated Between Their 7th and 48th	30
	Month	30
Table 3.2: Principal Reasons That Women Who Entered the	31	
Services in Fiscal Year 1993 Were Separated Between Their 7th	31	
and 48th Month	31	
Table 3.3: Attrition Rates for Male and Female Enlistees Who	32	
Entered the Services in Fiscal Year 1993 and Were Separated	32	
Before the End of Their First Terms	32	
Table 3.4: Comparison of Official Reasons for the Separation of	33	
Men and Women After Subtracting Discharges for Pregnancy	33	
Table 3.5: Separations for Misconduct for Persons Who Enlisted	40	
in Fiscal Year 1993 and Were Separated Between Their 7th and	40	
48th Month	40	

---

Table 3.6: Separations for Medical or Physical Problems of Enlistees Who Entered the Services in Fiscal Year 1993 and Were Separated Between Their 7th and 48th Month	41
Table 3.7: Separations for Unsatisfactory Performance of Enlistees Entering the Services in Fiscal Year 1993 and Being Separated Between Their 7th and 48th Month	42
Table 3.8: Separations for Drug Use for Persons Who Enlisted in Fiscal Year 1993 and Were Separated Between Their 7th and 48th Month	43
Table 3.9: Pregnancy and Parenthood Separations for Female Enlistees Who Entered the Services in Fiscal Year 1993 and Were Separated Between Their 7th and 48th Month	45
Table I.1: 48-Month Attrition Rates by Education Level for Enlistees Who Entered the Services in Fiscal Year 1993	62
Table I.2: 48-Month Attrition Rates by Armed Forces Qualification Test Category and Score for Enlistees Who Entered the Services in Fiscal Year 1993	62
Table I.3: 48-Month Attrition Rates by Age at Enlistment for Enlistees Entering the Services in Fiscal Year 1993	62
Table I.4: 48-Month Attrition Rates for Male and Female Enlistees Entering the Services in Fiscal Year 1993	63
Table I.5: 48-Month Attrition Rates by Race/Ethnic Group for Enlistees Entering the Services in Fiscal Year 1993	63
Table II.1: Army Attrition by DOD Primary Occupation	64
Table II.2: Navy Attrition by DOD Primary Occupation	66
Table II.3: Air Force Attrition by DOD Primary Occupation	68
Table II.4: Marine Corps Attrition by DOD Primary Occupation	70

---

## Figures

Figure 2.1: Timing of Attrition for Enlistees Who Entered the Services in Fiscal Year 1993	24
Figure 2.2: Numbers of Enlistees Who Entered the Services in Fiscal Year 1993 and Were Separated During Their First Terms	25
Figure 3.1: Top Reasons for Male Attrition in the Marine Corps Between the 7th and 48th Month	34
Figure 3.2: Top Reasons for Male Attrition in the Army Between the 7th and 48th Month	34
Figure 3.3: Top Reasons for Male Attrition in the Navy Between the 7th and 48th Month	35
Figure 3.4: Top Reasons for Male Attrition in the Air Force Between the 7th and 48th Month	36

---

**Contents**

---

Figure 3.5: Top Reasons for Female Attrition in the Marine Corps Between the 7th and 48th Month	37
Figure 3.6: Top Reasons for Female Attrition in the Army Between the 7th and 48th Month	37
Figure 3.7: Top Reasons for Female Attrition in the Navy Between the 7th and 48th Month	38
Figure 3.8: Top Reasons for Female Attrition in the Air Force Between the 7th and 48th Month	38

---

**Abbreviations**

AFQT	Armed Forces Qualification Test
DMDC	Defense Manpower Data Center
DOD	Department of Defense
GAO	General Accounting Office
TRADOC	Training and Doctrine Command

# Introduction

Since the beginning of the all-volunteer force in 1973, the military services have recruited hundreds of thousands of new enlistees each year. While these enlistees are required to sign contracts committing them to remain on active duty for a specified period of time, the services have found that many do not fulfill this commitment. In 1997, we reported on the reasons that enlistees do not complete their first 6 months of service. For this follow-on report, we have analyzed why enlistees who successfully complete their first 6 months of service are separated before their contract terms have expired.

## Attrition Rate Is the Percentage of Enlistees Who Do Not Complete Their Contractual Obligations

Before new recruits are sent to basic training, they are required to take an enlistment oath and sign a contract to serve one of the military services for a specified period of time, generally between 2 and 6 years. For enlistees who entered the services in fiscal year 1993, about 87 percent signed contracts for 2, 3, or 4 years. The breakdown of contract length is as follows: 8.2 percent for 2 years, 15 percent for 3 years, 64.2 percent for 4 years, 4.1 percent for 5 years, and 8.4 percent for 6 years.

DOD defines attrition as the failure of an enlistee to complete his or her contractual obligation. Some attrition occurs during basic training, which lasts from 6 to 12 weeks, depending on the service. Some attrition occurs during initial skill technical training, which lasts for a few weeks to more than 1 year, depending on the enlistee's occupation. Finally, some attrition occurs after enlistees have reported to their first duty assignments. By the 6-month point in enlistees' first terms, most have completed both basic and initial skill training and have been assigned to their first duty stations, though this is not the case for enlistees whose occupations require longer and more extensive training. Two examples include the Air Force's pararescue occupation, which requires 55 weeks of training beyond basic training and the Navy's electronics technician rating, which requires 36.7 weeks of training after basic.

## Composition of Enlistees Who Entered the Services in Fiscal Year 1993

In fiscal year 1993, 202,908 enlistees without prior military service signed first-term contracts. Of this number, 174,555 (86 percent) were men, and 28,353 (14 percent) were women. Women represented 22 percent of Air Force enlistees, 16 percent of Army enlistees, 13 percent of Navy enlistees, and 5 percent of Marine Corps enlistees. In terms of quality measures, 91.5 percent of all enlistees held high school diplomas, and 71.1 percent scored in the upper half of the Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT). (More data on this group's demographics is contained in app. I.)

In presenting our detailed analysis of first-term attrition, we track all enlistees who entered the services in fiscal year 1993 up until the end of fiscal year 1997, 48 months later, since this is the latest available data. For enlistees with 2-, 3-, and 4-year contracts, we counted as attrition those enlistees who did not complete the full length of their contracts. For enlistees with 5- or 6-year contracts, we counted as attrition those enlistees who did not complete 48 months of their contracts.

---

## **Our Previous Work in the Area of Attrition and Recruiting**

In January 1997, we reported that one-third of all first-term enlistees do not complete their first terms of service and that a significant portion of this attrition occurs in the enlistees' first 6 months.<sup>1</sup> In our report, we made recommendations to the Department of Defense (DOD) and the services on how they could improve their (1) use of separation codes to better analyze attrition, (2) recruiter incentive systems by tying these systems to recruits' successful completion of basic training, and (3) screening of recruits by adding and revising medical screening forms and moving all drug testing to the Military Entrance Processing Commands. We testified on this work before the Subcommittee on Personnel, Senate Committee on Armed Services in March 1997.<sup>2</sup> The recommendations contained in our report were incorporated into the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1998 (P.L. 105-85).

In January 1998, we issued a more detailed report on recruiter incentive systems and the selection of recruiters.<sup>3</sup> This work was also aimed at identifying what could be done to reduce attrition. Among our recommendations were for the services to (1) improve the screening of recruiters to ensure that those selected for recruiting duty possessed traits characteristic of successful recruiters; (2) require incoming recruits to undergo physical fitness tests before they report to basic training to screen out candidates likely to separate early due to poor physical conditioning; and (3) encourage the use of quarterly floating goals for recruiters to relieve pressure on them and to increase their morale and productivity. In March 1998, we testified before the Senate Committee on Armed Services' Subcommittee on Personnel and the House Committee on National

---

<sup>1</sup>Military Attrition: DOD Could Save Millions by Better Screening Enlisted Personnel (GAO/NSIAD-97-39, Jan. 6, 1997).

<sup>2</sup>Military Attrition: Better Screening of Enlisted Personnel Could Save DOD Millions of Dollars (GAO/T-NSIAD-97-102, Mar. 5, 1997).

<sup>3</sup>Military Recruiting: DOD Could Improve Its Recruiter Selection and Incentive Systems (GAO/NSIAD-98-58, Jan. 30, 1998).

---

Security's Subcommittee on Military Personnel on how well the services were managing attrition and the screening of recruiters and their recruits.<sup>4</sup>

---

## Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

The Chairman and the Ranking Minority Member of the Senate Committee on Armed Services' Subcommittee on Personnel asked that we continue our work in the area of attrition by analyzing the historical separation rates of enlisted personnel who serve 6 months but leave military service before completing their first contract terms. While we developed some overall historical attrition data, we focused our detailed analysis on enlistees who entered the services in fiscal year 1993 and were separated by the end of fiscal year 1997. Specifically, we determined (1) the rate and timing of attrition, (2) the extent of DOD's investment in recruiting and training first-term enlistees, (3) reasons for attrition after training, (4) servicemembers' perceptions of quality-of-life factors that contribute to attrition, and (5) actions DOD and the services are taking to reduce enlistees' attrition. We also agreed to provide attrition data for enlistees by educational background, AFQT score, age at enlistment, gender, and race/ethnic group (see app. I).

To determine historical first-term attrition rates, we obtained data from the Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC), whose primary purpose is to support the management needs of the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness. The data covered all enlistees without prior service who entered the military from fiscal year 1982 through 1993<sup>5</sup> and included the gender, educational background, age at enlistment, race, AFQT score, occupational code, and separation code (for those who left the services).

To ensure a standardized reporting of attrition rates, we measured attrition at the 48-month point for all enlistees entering the services from fiscal year 1982 through 1993. These groups of enlistees reached their 48-month points of service from fiscal year 1986 through 1997. Our calculation of attrition did not include the early separation of enlistees with 5- or 6-year contracts who were discharged in their final 1 to 2 years of service. However, because the majority of first-term contracts are for 4 years, we made our calculation at the 48-month point to include the most recent data available (fiscal year 1997). Also, like DMDC, we did not count

---

<sup>4</sup>Military Attrition: DOD Needs to Better Understand Reasons for Separation and Improve Recruiting Systems (GAO/T-NSIAD-98-109, Mar. 4, 1998) and Military Attrition: DOD Needs to Better Analyze Reasons for Separation and Improve Recruiting Systems (GAO/T-NSIAD-98-117, Mar. 12, 1998).

<sup>5</sup>We chose this period so that we could track trends over at least a 10-year period.

as attrition persons allowed to separate before the end of their terms through early release programs. Because our method does not include the attrition of enlistees with 5- or 6-year contracts who were separated in their final 1 or 2 years of service and because it does not include separations under early release programs, our information on attrition rates is somewhat conservative.

Although we did not extensively test the reliability of DMDC's database, we did discuss the Center's computation of attrition rates with DMDC officials and recalculated these rates ourselves. Our recalculated rates were comparable to DMDC's rates. We also compared our calculated attrition rates and categories of separation with information in the services' databases, and officials in each military service who track attrition verified the accuracy of our data on reasons for early separation.

To determine how much the services spend in recruiting and training each enlistee, we interviewed cost analysts at the Army's Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), Fort Monroe, Virginia; the Marine Corps Combat Development Command, Quantico, Virginia; the Air Force's Air Education and Training Command, Randolph Air Force Base, Texas; and the Navy's Office of the Chief of Naval Education and Training Command, Pensacola, Florida. We also discussed the calculation of the services' cost of recruiting and training enlistees with officials from the Center for Naval Analyses, the U.S. Army Cost and Economic Analysis Center, and the Naval Center for Cost Analysis, as well as service officials who track attrition. Because the services calculate recruiting and training costs differently and because analyzing the various costing methodologies was beyond the scope of our review, we formulated costs using data provided to us by DOD-level officials in the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Readiness) and the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Force Management Policy).

To determine reasons that enlistees were separated between their 7th and 48th month of service, we first analyzed DMDC data by separation code. The separation codes included in DMDC's database are taken from each servicemember's official discharge form, the DD Form 214, "Certificate of Release or Discharge From Active Duty."

We then interviewed 254 first-term enlistees and 41 supervisors to gain insight into root causes for early separation. Prior to our site visits, we notified service officials that we wished to interview first-term enlistees who were (1) in occupations that we had determined had

higher-than-average attrition rates and (2) being separated for misconduct, medical problems, unsatisfactory performance, drug use, and character/behavior disorders. (For a presentation of attrition rates by occupation, see app. II.)

During our site visits, we interviewed all or nearly all enlistees being separated at the time. Our interviewees included 110 first-term enlistees who were being separated early and 144 first-term enlistees who planned to complete their terms. Of the 110 enlistees who were being separated early, 97, or 88 percent, were being discharged for misconduct, medical problems, drug use, performance problems, and character/behavior disorders. We interviewed an additional 41 enlisted personnel on their second or subsequent terms, as well as supervisory officer and enlisted personnel at all locations to obtain insights into their perceptions of what drives first-term attrition.

We conducted one-on-one interviews with first-term enlistees and supervisors and conducted large group discussions with other commissioned and noncommissioned officers. We chose the following locations to conduct our interviews based on our analysis of where large concentrations of first-term enlistees were assigned, particularly in occupations experiencing higher-than-average attrition rates:

- the Air Force's Air Combat Command, Langley, Virginia;
- the Navy's Office of the Commander in Chief, U.S. Atlantic Fleet, Norfolk, Virginia, and Submarine Torpedo Facility, Yorktown, Virginia;
- the Marine Corps' II Expeditionary Force, Camp Lejeune and Cherry Point, North Carolina; and
- the Army's XVIII Airborne Corps, Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

During our one-on-one interviews, we assured interviewees that we would not associate their names with information they provided to us. Though we took notes during our interviews, we did not record interviewees' names. Interviews lasted from 10 to 45 minutes each. We asked open-ended questions that would allow enlistees to tell us how they felt about being in the service. In summary, our questions were as follows:

- Are you being separated before the end of your first term? If so, why?
- What do you plan to do after you leave the service?
- Do you want to stay in the service? If given the opportunity, would you like to reenlist?

- Do you have any other thoughts on your occupation and your time in the service? If you want to leave, is there anything the service could have done to make you want to stay?

While our interviews with first-term enlistees do not represent a statistical sample, they provided useful insights into enlistees' perceptions of the reasons for attrition. Our interviews were intended to solicit any and all thoughts on why enlistees were not completing their first terms and on the advantages and disadvantages of military service.

To gain insight into first-term attrition, we interviewed officials in

- the Army's Directorate of Military Personnel Management, Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, Washington, D.C.;
- the Navy's Office of the Assistant Chief of Naval Personnel for Military Personnel Policy and Career Progression, Bureau of Naval Personnel, Arlington, Virginia;
- the Air Force's Directorate of Military Personnel Policy, Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff, Personnel, Washington, D.C.; and
- the Marine Corps' Manpower Plans and Policy Division, Office of the Assistant Deputy Chief of Staff for Military and Reserve Affairs, Arlington, Virginia.

We conducted our review between August 1997 and September 1998 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

---

# High First-Term Attrition Results in a Reduced Return on the Services' Recruiting and Training Investment

---

About one-third of all enlistees who entered the services between fiscal year 1982 and 1993 did not complete their first contract terms. Most of these enlistees were separated between their 7th and 48th month of service, when they had been fully trained and were assigned to jobs. Our analysis of all enlistees entering the services in fiscal year 1993 showed that these general historical trends continued. However, the rates were slightly higher in the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force. DOD's attrition rates throughout this period are somewhat higher than reported because they do not include some enlistees who were allowed to separate early for various reasons, such as to attend a civilian school or to allow the services to meet mandated end strengths.

DOD estimates of fiscal year 1998 costs indicate that by the time enlistees have been recruited and trained, generally within the first 6 months of service, the services have already spent about \$35,000 on each one. This figure includes enlistees' pay and allowances, as well as the cost of the services' recruiting and training infrastructure. For enlistees who entered the services in fiscal year 1993, the cost of recruiting and training was lower, ranging from \$19,143 to \$24,885. Using these earlier costs, we estimate that the services spent \$1.3 billion on recruiting and training the enlistees who entered the services in fiscal year 1993 but did not complete their first terms. During these enlistees' abbreviated time in service, approximately \$0.8 billion of the \$1.3 billion was spent on enlistees' pay and allowances. The remaining \$0.5 billion was spent on the services' recruiting and training infrastructure, which includes recruiting and training sites, instructors, and recruiters. When the services separate enlistees between their 7th and 48th month of service, they are not receiving a full return on their investment in personnel whom they have partially or fully trained and provided with on-the-job experience.

---

## Attrition Rates Have Been Fairly Stable Over the Past Decade, but Fiscal Year 1993 Data Shows a Slight Increase

DMDC, as DOD's primary repository of servicewide attrition data, reports that for enlistees who entered the services between fiscal year 1982 and 1993, the attrition rate averaged 31.7 percent (see table 2.1). In most of these years, attrition rates have been lowest for the Air Force and highest for the Army.

**Chapter 2**  
**High First-Term Attrition Results in a**  
**Reduced Return on the Services' Recruiting**  
**and Training Investment**

**Table 2.1: Percentage of Enlisted Personnel Who Were Separated Before Their 48th Month of Service**

<b>Fiscal year of enlistment</b>	<b>Army</b>	<b>Navy</b>	<b>Marine Corps</b>	<b>Air Force</b>	<b>All services</b>
1982	34.5	30.3	34.4	30.8	32.6
1983	32.7	25.6	31.1	23.4	29.0
1984	31.3	26.1	31.2	24.7	28.7
1985	30.5	30.6	33.7	24.6	29.6
1986	31.3	33.8	35.4	26.3	31.4
1987	31.4	31.5	33.0	25.3	30.5
1988	33.7	31.6	30.4	25.5	31.3
1989	35.3	34.0	32.7	30.1	33.7
1990	36.4	32.6	36.2	30.4	34.2
1991	36.8	30.5	34.2	31.7	33.6
1992	35.9	32.2	32.2	30.0	33.2
1993	39.3	35.8	31.5	32.5	35.8
1982-93	33.6	31.2	33.0	27.4	31.7

As shown in the table, attrition rates increased in the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force for those entering the services in fiscal year 1993 and being separated by the end of fiscal year 1997—the latest available data. In fact, these rates were higher than they had been in over a decade. The Marine Corps, in contrast, had the lowest attrition rate, continuing a 3-year decline beginning in fiscal year 1990. Our data indicates that most of the rise in attrition rates for the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force occurred during enlistees' first 6 months of service.<sup>1</sup>

**A Large Portion of Attrition Occurs Between Enlistees' 7th and 48th Month of Service**

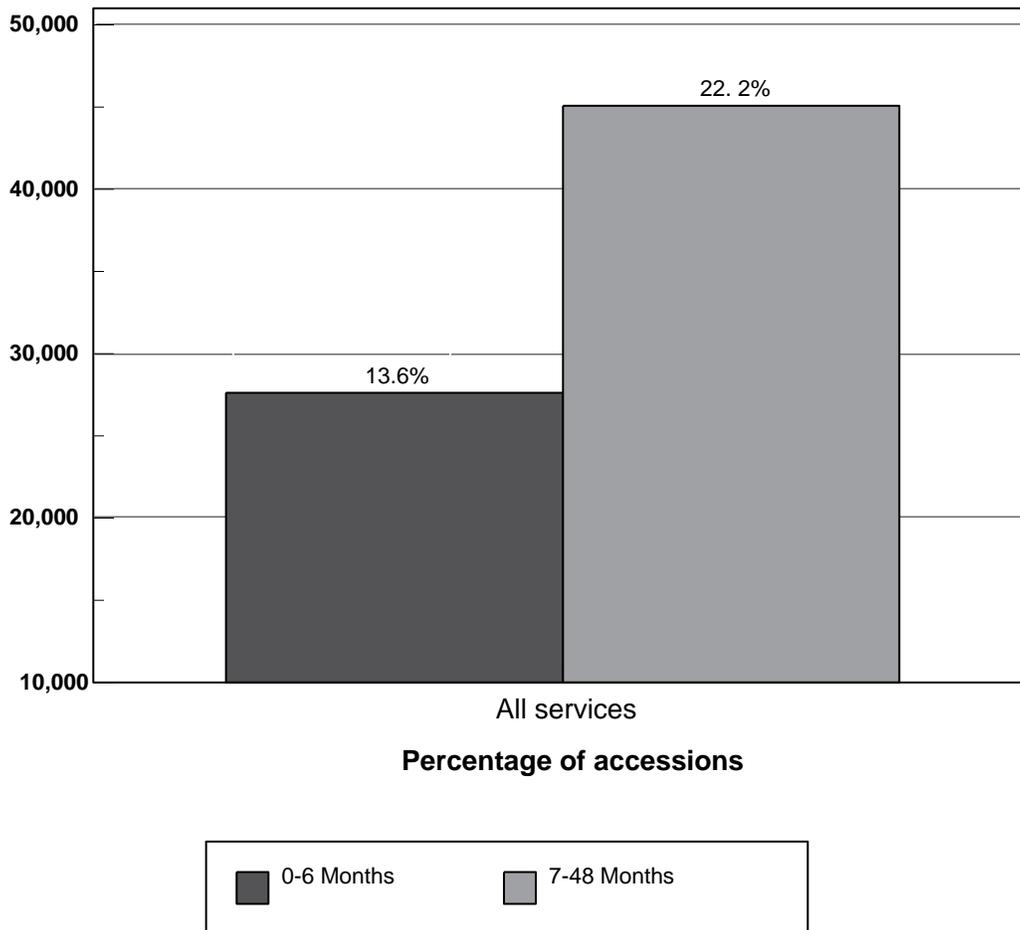
An analysis of the 35.8-percent attrition rate for enlistees who entered the services in fiscal year 1993 indicates that 13.6 percent of all enlistees were separated before they had completed 6 months of service or less. The remaining 22.2 percent were separated between their 7th and 48th month of service. (See fig. 2.1.)

<sup>1</sup>As we reported in 1997, official reasons for enlistees' separation during their first 6 months of service have to do largely with new recruits' medical conditions, drug use, and problems with entry-level performance.

**Chapter 2**  
**High First-Term Attrition Results in a**  
**Reduced Return on the Services' Recruiting**  
**and Training Investment**

**Figure 2.1: Timing of Attrition for Enlistees Who Entered the Services in Fiscal Year 1993**

**Separations**



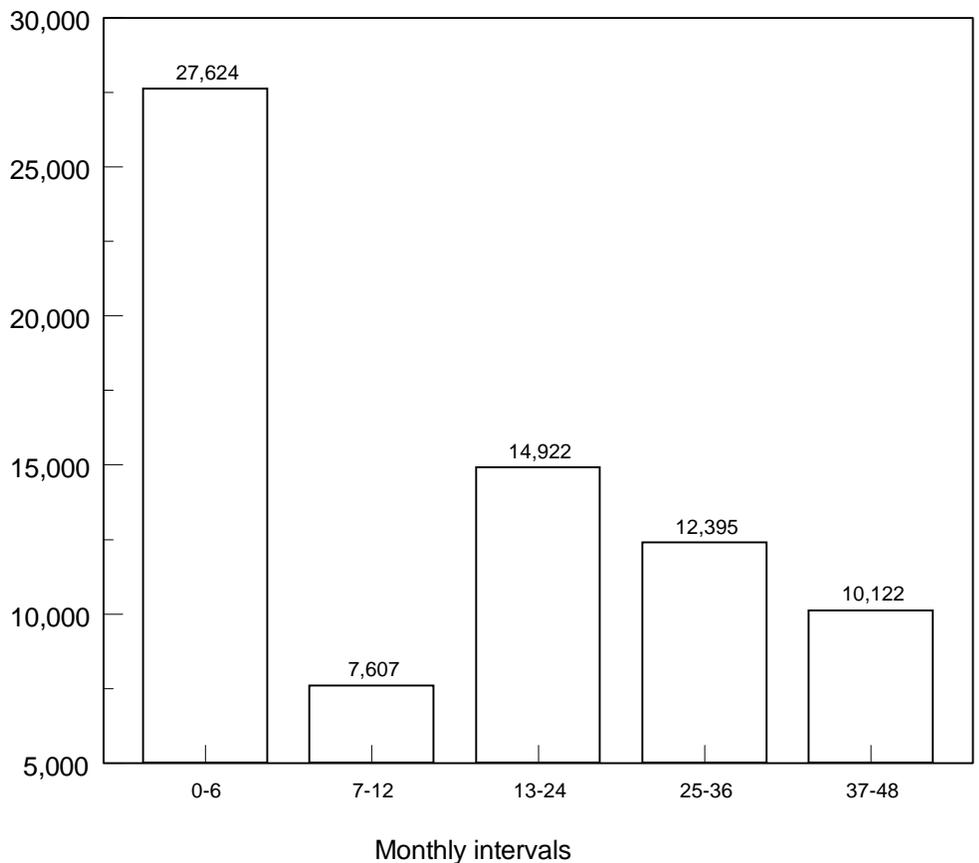
The first 6 months of service represent the period when the highest concentration of attrition occurred for enlistees who entered the services in fiscal year 1993. For the 72,670 enlistees who did not complete their first terms, 27,624 were separated in this initial period. Between month 7 and 12, an additional 7,607 enlistees were separated. During these enlistees' 2nd, 3rd, and 4th years of service, attrition dropped gradually. In the 2nd year of service, 14,922 enlistees were discharged. In the 3rd year of

**Chapter 2**  
**High First-Term Attrition Results in a**  
**Reduced Return on the Services' Recruiting**  
**and Training Investment**

enlistment, 12,395 persons were separated, and in the 4th year, 10,122 persons were discharged. (See fig. 2.2.)

**Figure 2.2: Numbers of Enlistees Who Entered the Services in Fiscal Year 1993 and Were Separated During Their First Terms**

Separations



**Overall Attrition Rates Do Not Include All Early Releases**

DOD-reported attrition rates include some enlistees who are separated voluntarily under the services' early release programs, such as enlistees released from the Air Force voluntarily to take other employment opportunities. However, the reported rates do not include enlistees released voluntarily to attend school or for reductions in force. As a result,

---

**Chapter 2**  
**High First-Term Attrition Results in a**  
**Reduced Return on the Services' Recruiting**  
**and Training Investment**

---

attrition rates would be even higher if they included all enlistees who did not complete their first contract terms.

The services' standard policy has been that enlistees are generally not to be released more than 90 days before the end of their first terms. However, in practice, the services have for various reasons released enlistees more than 90 days early. According to DOD, the 90-day release option exists to preclude the cost and the inconvenience of transferring servicemembers to new duty positions just as they are about to complete their terms of service and be discharged. Marine Corps and Army officials told us that this 90-day standard remained the policy during downsizing. In contrast, the Air Force and the Navy deliberately released first-term enlistees much earlier than 90 days to meet mandated decreases in end strength during downsizing.

According to Navy data, beginning in fiscal year 1992, enlistees were voluntarily released up to 1 year before the end of their first terms. The number of these early releases peaked in fiscal year 1994, with 6,434 first-term personnel being allowed to separate 4 to 12 months early. In fiscal year 1997, this number was down to 1,604.<sup>2</sup> The Navy's most recent authorization for these reduction-in-strength early releases was disseminated by the Secretary of the Navy in fiscal year 1993 and continues through fiscal year 1999. None of the persons allowed to separate early from the Navy under the early release programs are included in DMDC calculations of attrition rates.

During its downsizing, the Air Force allowed some first-term enlistees to be released after only 1 year of service to go into the reserves. The Air Force also allowed enlistees to be released early to attend school or to take other employment. There was no minimum time-in-service requirement for these two types of voluntary release. DMDC does not include Air Force enlistees released to go into the reserves or to go to school in its attrition statistics; it does include enlistees released early to take other employment. According to Air Force officials, allowing first-term enlistees to separate early was one way to avoid having to separate and pay benefits to more senior enlisted personnel while downsizing was occurring. The Air Force has recently announced its decision to reduce the number of early releases it approves, though its early release programs remain in effect.

---

<sup>2</sup>The Navy's calculations include all enlistees who were separated between 4 and 12 months early in a particular fiscal year, regardless of the fiscal year in which they entered the service. The Navy's data, therefore, will not match our calculations, which include the separation of all enlistees who entered the Navy in fiscal year 1993 and were separated more than 90 days early in fiscal years 1993-97.

**Chapter 2  
High First-Term Attrition Results in a  
Reduced Return on the Services' Recruiting  
and Training Investment**

Our analysis of DMDC's data on all enlistees who entered the services in fiscal year 1993 confirms that the Air Force and the Navy allowed large numbers of enlisted personnel to voluntarily separate more than 90 days early under early release programs between fiscal year 1993 and 1997. The Marine Corps and the Army, on the other hand, released fewer persons under these programs. (See table 2.2.) Enlistees released early to attend school or as part of reduction-in-strength programs are not included in DMDC's calculation of attrition rates.

**Table 2.2: Enlistees Who Entered the Services in Fiscal Year 1993 and Were Released More Than 90 Days Early During Fiscal Years 1993-97**

<b>Time before the end of the contract</b>	<b>Army</b>	<b>Navy</b>	<b>Marine Corps</b>	<b>Air Force</b>
13 or more months early	110	1,971	3	753
4-12 months early	108	983	2	349
<b>Total</b>	<b>218</b>	<b>2,954</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>1,102</b>

Adding releases more than 3 months early to attrition rates for enlistees who entered the services in fiscal year 1993 does not affect the Army's or the Marine Corps' rates. However, it adds 4.7 percentage points to the Navy's rate of 35.8 percent, increasing it to 40.5 percent, and it adds 3.5 percentage points to the Air Force's rate of 32.5 percent, increasing it to 36 percent.

**Services' Investment  
in the Recruiting and  
Training of Enlistees  
Who Entered in Fiscal  
Year 1993 and  
Separated Early Totals  
\$1.3 Billion**

According to DOD, in fiscal year 1993, the average cost of recruiting and training each enlistee ranged from \$19,143 to \$24,885, depending on the service. Using figures on the cost of recruiting and providing basic training to these enlistees, we estimate that the services invested \$237 million in the 21,002 enlistees who entered the services in fiscal year 1993 and were separated in their first 3 months of service, when most had not yet begun initial skills training. We estimate that the services invested another \$1.1 billion in the 51,668 enlistees who were separated after they had begun or completed their initial skills training. Of this total of \$1.3 billion in recruiting and training funding, a DOD official estimates that about two-thirds, or \$0.8 billion, was spent to pay the salaries of student enlistees, and one-third, or \$0.5 billion, was spent to pay for the recruiting and training infrastructure, which includes recruiting and training sites, instructors, and recruiters.

Updated recruiting and training costs provided by DOD indicate that these costs have risen since fiscal year 1993. In fiscal year 1998, DOD estimates the average cost of recruiting and training each enlistee is \$35,500: \$6,700

---

**Chapter 2**  
**High First-Term Attrition Results in a**  
**Reduced Return on the Services' Recruiting**  
**and Training Investment**

---

for recruiting and \$28,800 for training.<sup>3</sup> The fact that recruiting and training costs are rising demonstrates that if current attrition rates continue, the cost of attrition to the services will become even greater. While it is not feasible to expect to save the entire cost of recruiting and training for each enlistee who is not separated, the cost figures do demonstrate the magnitude of the cost of recruiting and training hundreds of thousands of new recruits each year. It would be expected that if there were a significant reduction in attrition, the recruiting and training infrastructure could be reduced, resulting in major savings. Also, it is clear that once the individual has been trained, the longer the services can keep an enlistee, the more of a return the services will receive on their investment.

---

<sup>3</sup>This includes the cost of basic training and additional occupational training that takes place generally within the first 6 months of an enlistee's first term. In some cases, this occupational training can last up to 1 year or more.

---

# Official Reasons for Early Separations

---

According to the official codes used to categorize enlistees' separations, the primary reasons for the early discharge of enlistees who entered the services in fiscal year 1993 varied by gender and by service. While the services' official separation codes capture general categories of discharge, we continue to find, as we did in our 1997 report on attrition from basic training, that the services use these separation codes differently and that these codes capture only one of several possible reasons for a single early discharge. The services' sometimes extreme variations in the percentages of their separations for a given official reason suggest that the services interpret separation codes differently, that their separation policies differ, that the services have very different attrition problems, or some combination of these explanations.

---

## Official Reasons for Separation Vary by Gender

The principal reasons that men who entered the services in fiscal year 1993 were separated between their 7th and 48th month are presented in table 3.1 in order of their magnitude. As shown, over 70 percent of the servicewide men in this group were separated for misconduct, medical/physical conditions, performance problems, and drug use.

**Chapter 3**  
**Official Reasons for Early Separations**

**Table 3.1: Principal Reasons That Men Who Entered the Services in Fiscal Year 1993 Were Separated Between Their 7th and 48th Month**

<b>Official reason</b>	<b>Number of male enlistees separated</b>	<b>Percentage of all male attrition between the 7th and 48th month</b>	<b>Cumulative percentage</b>
Misconduct	12,425	33.4	33.4
Medical/physical problems	5,634	15.2	48.6
Performance problems	4,625	12.5	61.1
Drugs	3,448	9.3	70.4
Character/behavior disorder	2,548	6.9	77.3
Miscellaneous reasons <sup>a</sup>	1,643	4.4	81.7
Weight/body fat	1,552	4.2	85.9
Dependency/hardship	1,311	3.5	89.4
Alcoholism	827	2.2	91.6
Erroneous enlistment <sup>b</sup>	326	0.9	92.5
Homosexuality	192	0.5	93.0
Parenthood	143	0.4	93.4
Sexual perversion	85	0.2	93.6
All other reasons <sup>c</sup>	2,403	6.5	100.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>37,162</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.1<sup>d</sup></b>

<sup>a</sup>The Air Force includes early releases for employment in the category of "miscellaneous" reasons.

<sup>b</sup>"Erroneous enlistment" is an enlistment that would not have occurred if relevant facts had been known by the government or if appropriate directives had been followed. The failure to reveal relevant facts must not have been the result of fraudulent conduct by the enlistee.

<sup>c</sup>This category captures all reasons not listed above, such as enuresis, financial irresponsibility, unsanitary habits, and unsuitability, among others.

<sup>d</sup>Cumulative total does not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

The principal reasons that women who entered the services in fiscal year 1993 were separated between their 7th and 48th month are presented in table 3.2 in order of their magnitude. As shown, over 71 percent of all women in this group were separated for pregnancy, medical/physical problems, misconduct, performance problems, or parenthood.

**Chapter 3**  
**Official Reasons for Early Separations**

**Table 3.2: Principal Reasons That Women Who Entered the Services in Fiscal Year 1993 Were Separated Between Their 7th and 48th Month**

<b>Official reason</b>	<b>Number of female enlistees separated</b>	<b>Percentage of all female attrition between the 7th and 48th month</b>	<b>Cumulative percentage</b>
Pregnancy	2,074	26.3	26.3
Medical/physical problems	1,075	13.6	39.9
Misconduct	890	11.3	51.2
Performance problems	864	11.0	62.2
Parenthood	706	9.0	71.2
Character/behavior disorder	550	7.0	78.2
Dependency/hardship	440	5.6	83.8
Weight/body fat	380	4.8	88.6
Miscellaneous reasons <sup>a</sup>	379	4.8	93.4
Drugs	152	1.9	95.3
Homosexuality	97	1.2	96.5
Alcoholism	56	0.7	97.2
Erroneous enlistment <sup>b</sup>	9	0.1	97.3
Sexual perversion	5	0.1	97.4
All other reasons <sup>c</sup>	207	2.6	100.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>7,884</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

<sup>a</sup>The Air Force includes early releases for employment in the category of "miscellaneous" reasons.

<sup>b</sup>"Erroneous enlistment" is an enlistment that would not have occurred if relevant facts had been known by the government or if appropriate directives had been followed. The failure to reveal relevant facts must not have been the result of fraudulent conduct by the enlistee.

<sup>c</sup>This category captures all reasons not listed above, such as enuresis, financial irresponsibility, unsanitary habits, and unsuitability, among others.

**Separations for Pregnancy Explain Some Gender Differences in Attrition Rates**

Overall attrition rates (or separation rates between 0 and 48 months) are higher for women who entered the services in fiscal year 1993 than they are for men. Separations for pregnancy explain the differences in attrition rates by gender in the Navy and the Air Force. However, this explanation does not hold true for the Marine Corps and the Army. If separations for pregnancy are subtracted from the total number of each service's discharges, attrition rates for Navy women are actually 2 percentage points lower than they are for Navy men. After subtracting separations for pregnancy, attrition rates for Air Force men and women are the same. After subtracting separations for pregnancy, attrition rates are still 6 percentage points higher for Army women and 9 percentage points

higher for Marine Corps women (see table 3.3). It should be noted that a much larger percentage of female separations are due to reasons related to parenthood—9 percent for women compared to 0.4 percent for men.

**Table 3.3: Attrition Rates for Male and Female Enlistees Who Entered the Services in Fiscal Year 1993 and Were Separated Before the End of Their First Terms (From 0 to 48 Months)**

Figures in percentages

<b>Service</b>	<b>Female attrition rate, including pregnancy separations</b>	<b>Female attrition rate, excluding pregnancy separations</b>	<b>Male attrition rate</b>
Army	51	43	37
Navy	39	33	35
Marine Corps	49	40	31
Air Force	38	31	31
All services	45	37	34

**Subtracting Separations for Pregnancy Does Not Explain All Gender Differences in Reasons for Separation**

Our analysis of reasons for separation between the 7th and 48th month indicates that, after separations for pregnancy are subtracted, discharges for misconduct, drugs, and alcoholism continue to represent higher proportions of separations for men than for women. On the other hand, discharges for medical/physical and performance problems, for character/behavior disorders, for dependency/hardship, and for parenthood continue to represent higher proportions of separations for women than for men. (See table 3.4.)

**Table 3.4: Comparison of Official Reasons for the Separation of Men and Women After Subtracting Discharges for Pregnancy**

<b>Official reason</b>	<b>Percentage of all male attrition between the 7th and 48th month</b>	<b>Percentage of all female nonpregnancy attrition between the 7th and 48th month</b>
Misconduct	33.4	15.3
Medical/physical problems	15.2	18.5
Performance problems	12.5	14.9
Drugs	9.3	2.6
Character/behavior disorder	6.9	9.5
Miscellaneous reasons <sup>a</sup>	4.4	6.5
Weight/body fat	4.2	6.5
Dependency/hardship	3.5	7.6
Alcoholism	2.2	1.0
Erroneous enlistment	0.9	0.2
Homosexuality	0.5	1.7
Parenthood	0.4	12.2
Sexual perversion	0.2	0.1
All other reasons <sup>b</sup>	6.5	3.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.1<sup>c</sup></b>	<b>100.2<sup>c</sup></b>

<sup>a</sup>The Air Force includes early releases for employment in the category of "miscellaneous" reasons.

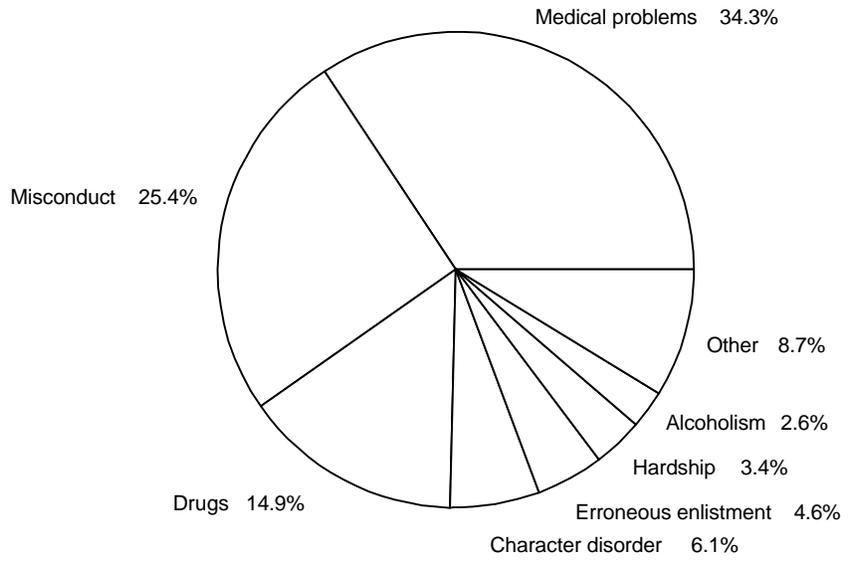
<sup>b</sup>This category captures all reasons not listed above.

<sup>c</sup>Total does not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

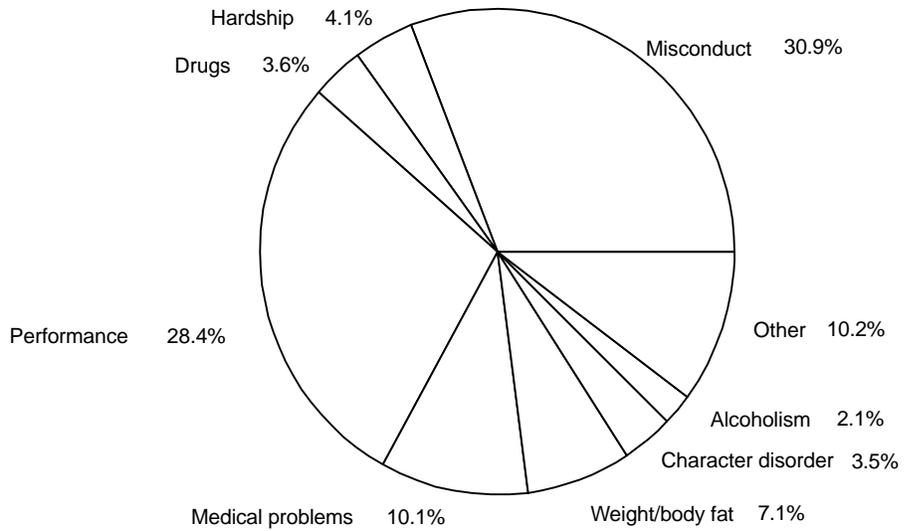
## Official Reasons for Separation Vary by Service

The incidence of separations within each category varies by service. For example, for Marine Corps men who entered the service in fiscal year 1993, the leading cause of separation was medical problems, and for Army, Navy, and Air Force men in this group, it was misconduct. (Figs. 3.1 through 3.4 show each service's major reasons for separation by gender.)

**Figure 3.1: Top Reasons for Male Attrition in the Marine Corps Between the 7th and 48th Month**



**Figure 3.2: Top Reasons for Male Attrition in the Army Between the 7th and 48th Month**



**Chapter 3**  
**Official Reasons for Early Separations**

**Figure 3.3: Top Reasons for Male Attrition in the Navy Between the 7th and 48th Month**

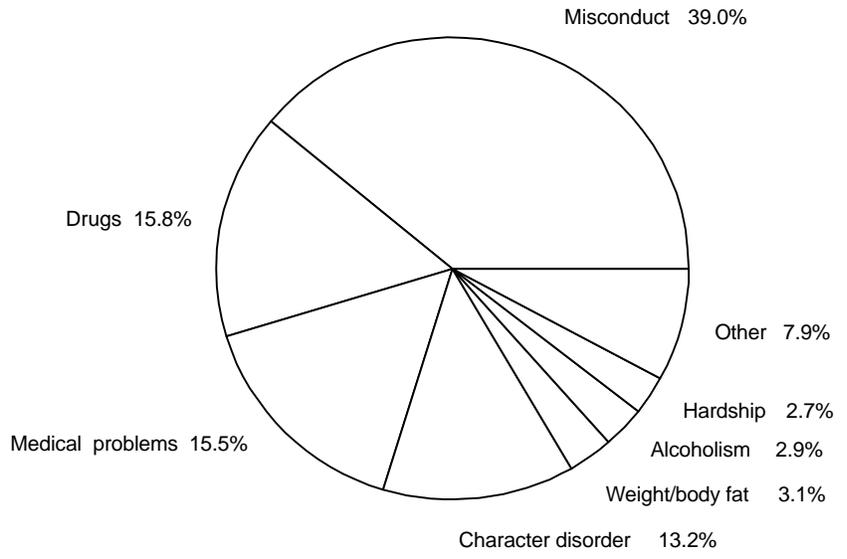
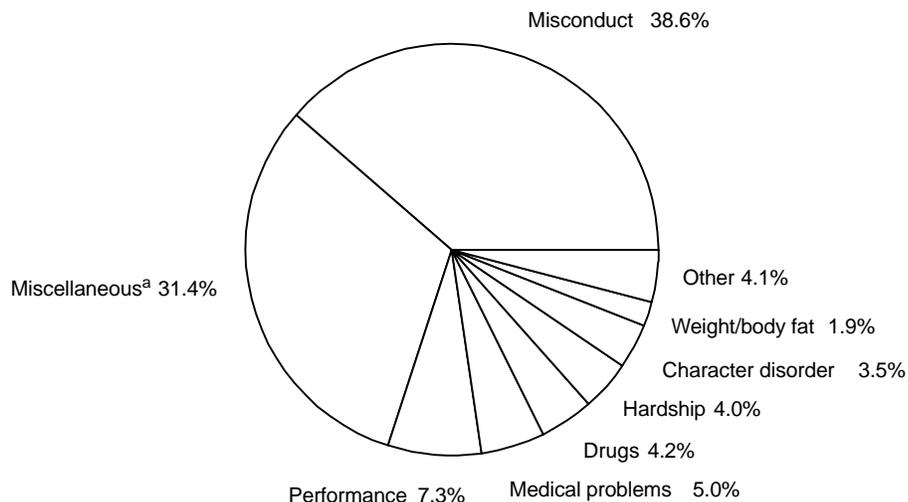


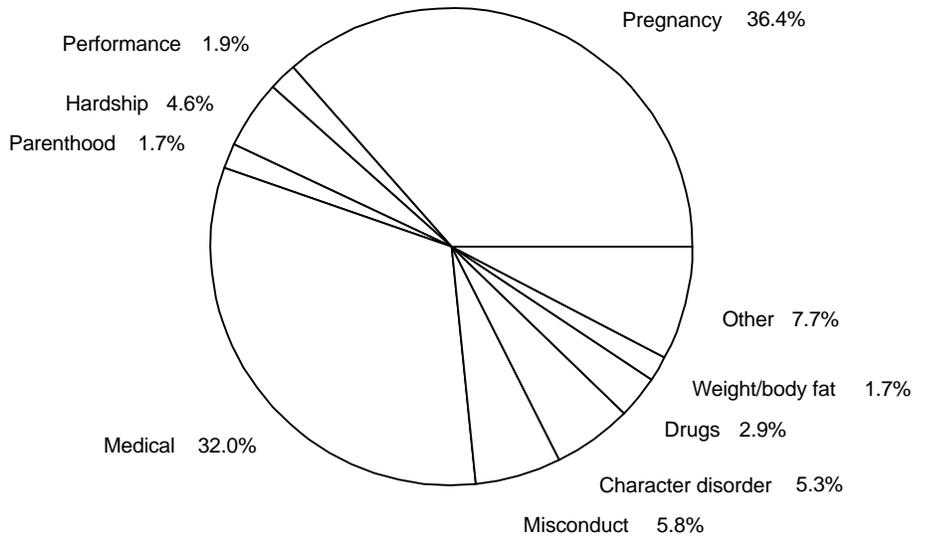
Figure 3.4: Top Reasons for Male Attrition in the Air Force Between the 7th and 48th Month



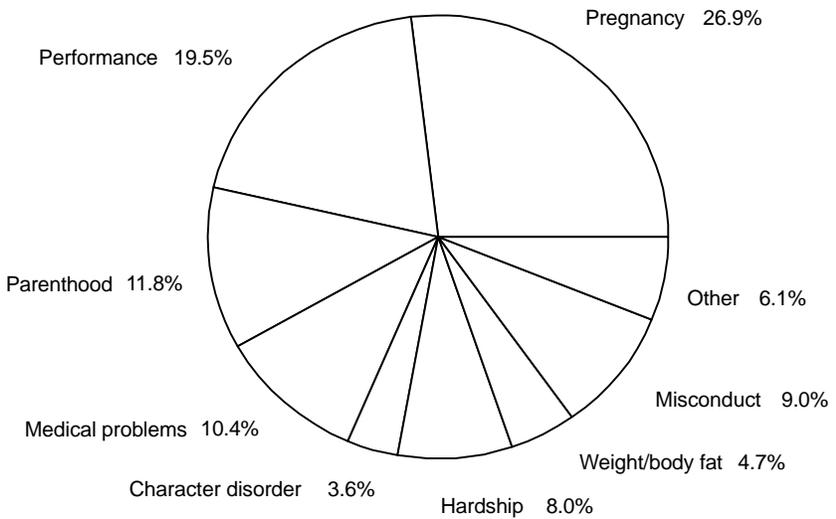
<sup>a</sup>The Air Force includes early releases for employment in the category of "miscellaneous" reasons.

Major reasons for female attrition also vary by service, although separations for pregnancy represent the largest single category of discharges for women in all four services. Separations for pregnancy represent between one-fourth and one-third of all female separations. For Navy and Marine Corps women who entered the services in fiscal year 1993, the second leading cause of separation was medical problems. For Air Force women, it was "miscellaneous" releases, and for Army women, it was performance problems. (See figs. 3.5 through 3.8.)

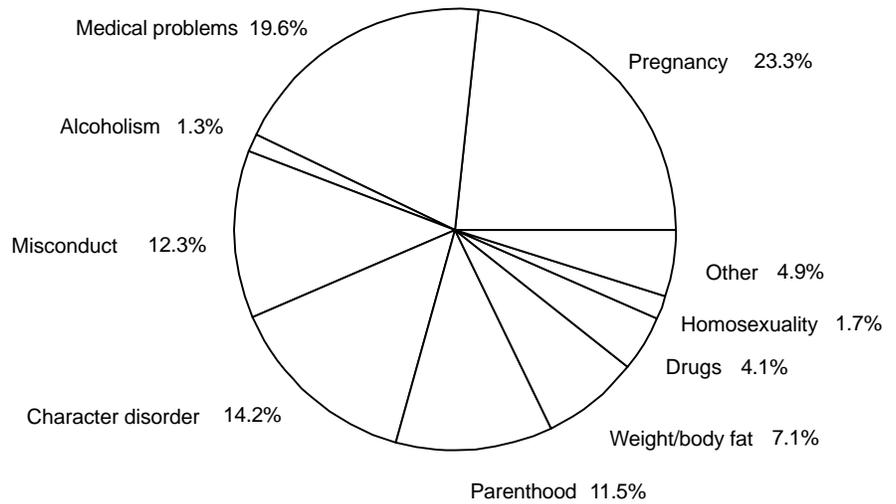
**Figure 3.5: Top Reasons for Female Attrition in the Marine Corps Between the 7th and 48th Month**



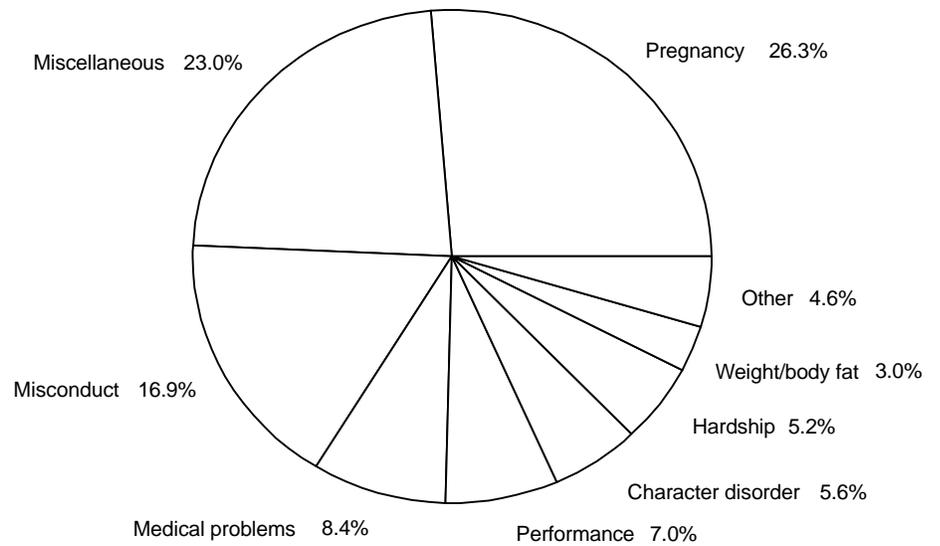
**Figure 3.6: Top Reasons for Female Attrition in the Army Between the 7th and 48th Month**



**Figure 3.7: Top Reasons for Female Attrition in the Navy Between the 7th and 48th Month**



**Figure 3.8: Top Reasons for Female Attrition in the Air Force Between the 7th and 48th Month**



---

## Differing Interpretations of Separation Codes and Policies May Explain Service Differences in Reasons for Discharge

In our January 1997 report on attrition from basic training, we made recommendations for DOD to improve the consistency with which the services apply separation codes. We found that the data DOD uses to track attrition is based on separation codes that the services interpret differently and that capture only one of many possible reasons for discharge. Our recommendations were incorporated in the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1998 (P.L. 105-85), and DOD has formed a working group that is reexamining the services' use of these separation codes.

Our current analysis of separation codes confirms the continued need for this effort. First, the services' extreme variations in numbers of separations for different reasons—such as unsatisfactory performance, medical conditions, and drug use—suggest that the services have different attrition problems, are interpreting the separation codes differently, have different separation policies, or some combination of these three explanations. Second, current separation codes do not provide information specific enough for DOD to understand the magnitude of certain types of discharge. For example, the separation code for unsatisfactory performance includes discharges for failure to pass physical fitness tests, career development tests, and on-the-job requirements but does not distinguish among the various categories of failure.

The following sections describe the variations in percentages of enlistees separated for the major official reasons for discharge: misconduct, medical conditions, unsatisfactory performance, drug use, and pregnancy.

---

## Discharges for Misconduct Represent One-Fourth to One-Third of All Separations

The categories of offenses included under separations for misconduct range from civilian court convictions, courts-martial, and serious offenses, such as larceny, to the less egregious category of minor disciplinary infractions, such as being habitually late for work. For all enlistees entering the services in fiscal year 1993, separations for misconduct between the 7th and 48th month of service represented about one-third of all separations for the Navy and the Air Force. Separations for misconduct represented about one-fourth of all separations for the Army and the Marine Corps (see table 3.5).

**Table 3.5: Separations for Misconduct for Persons Who Enlisted in Fiscal Year 1993 and Were Separated Between Their 7th and 48th Month**

<b>Service</b>	<b>Number separated</b>	<b>Percentage of each service's separations</b>
Navy	4,607	34.7
Air Force	2,235	33.4
Army	4,833	26.4
Marine Corps	1,640	24.2

The Army and the Navy have made it clear that they do not wish to reduce attrition rates by trying to rehabilitate individuals who engage in misconduct. For example, the Navy has recently made its definition of a “pattern of misconduct” more stringent, changing the number of offenses constituting a “pattern” from three or more to two or more. Also, the Army’s Director of Military Personnel Management has emphasized to its major commands that two of the largest areas of separations, discharges for misconduct and discharges in lieu of court-martial, “are areas that are absolutely non-negotiable.”

DOD and GAO both have efforts underway to determine whether there are better ways to screen incoming recruits for criminal backgrounds to ensure that all available information on past criminal behavior is considered in deciding whether to enlist new recruits. In April 1998, DOD issued a report making recommendations to improve the quality of its databases and to maintain preservice arrest information on recruits. GAO’s effort involves an examination of (1) the services’ policies, procedures, and practices for screening and granting enlistment waivers to recruits who have criminal backgrounds and (2) the completeness of the information sources used to check criminal records.

Some enlistees now separated for misconduct may be candidates for rehabilitation. For all services’ enlistees who entered in fiscal year 1993 and were separated between their 7th and 48th month, 12 percent of those separated for misconduct, or 1,602 persons, were found to have committed “minor disciplinary offenses.” At one unit we visited, an Air Force officer told us that most separations for misconduct were not for serious offenses but rather for minor disciplinary infractions. He said that it was extremely rare for an enlistee to be granted probation and rehabilitation. In the 7 months he had been at the unit, he had seen only one case in which an enlistee had been able to convince the local commander not to separate him. The officer said that it is almost a “foregone conclusion” that enlistees whose separations process has begun will be separated. He viewed it as a “waste” to separate some of these enlistees.

### Marine Corps Separates a Higher Percentage of Enlistees for Medical Problems Than the Other Services

As we reported in January 1997, separations for medical problems represent a large portion of all attrition from basic training. In that report, we made several recommendations for improving the medical screening of incoming recruits. The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1998 included all of our recommendations, and DOD is now working to improve medical screening.<sup>1</sup>

Separations for medical problems are also significant for enlistees in their 7th through 48th months of service. Enlistees may be separated for any number of disqualifying medical conditions, for example, a separated collarbone, a brain tumor, fallen arches, a seizure disorder, a broken back, or a serious knee injury. For enlistees entering the services in fiscal year 1993, the Marine Corps separated a higher percentage of its personnel for medical problems than the other services did (see table 3.6).

**Table 3.6: Separations for Medical or Physical Problems of Enlistees Who Entered the Services in Fiscal Year 1993 and Were Separated Between Their 7th and 48th Month**

Service	Number of separations	Percentage of each service's separations
Marine Corps	2,315	34.2
Navy	2,142	16.1
Army	1,865	10.2
Air Force	387	5.8

Again, the differences in numbers of enlistees placed in this category by the services may indicate variations in how the services apply separation codes. The fact that the Marine Corps has a higher number of enlistees separated for medical problems may also be a result of what may be the Marine Corps' more rigorous physical standards and training. Some Marine Corps officials told us that separations for medical problems are related to the physical difficulty of some jobs that are very strenuous and make demands on the body, particularly on the knees and ankles. Army personnel with whom we spoke said that in many cases involving medical problems, enlistees arrive at their first assignments already injured as a result of training.

<sup>1</sup>Among other things, we recommended that the services (1) require all applicants for enlistment to provide the names of their medical insurers and providers and sign a release form allowing the services to obtain past medical information and (2) use DOD's newly proposed database of medical diagnostic codes to determine whether adding medical screening tests or providing more thorough medical examinations to selected groups of applicants could cost-effectively reduce attrition at basic training.

**Army Separates More Enlistees for Performance Problems Than the Other Services Do**

Enlistees may be separated for unsatisfactory performance for a variety of reasons: for failing to perform adequately on their jobs, for failing physical fitness tests, or for failing career development tests. DMDC data indicates that the Army separates a far greater percentage of its enlistees for performance problems than do the other services (see table 3.7).

**Table 3.7: Separations for Unsatisfactory Performance of Enlistees Entering the Services in Fiscal Year 1993 and Being Separated Between Their 7th and 48th Month**

<b>Service</b>	<b>Number of separations</b>	<b>Percentage of each service's separations</b>
Army	4,860	26.6
Air Force	484	7.2
Marine Corps	84	1.2
Navy	61	0.5

The Army's larger number of separations for unsatisfactory performance may indicate that the Navy, the Air Force, and the Marine Corps list another reason for separating persons who experience performance problems. Or it may indicate that the Navy, the Air Force, and the Marine Corps retain more of these enlistees. Another possible explanation is that during downsizing, the Army allowed enlistees with "bars to reenlistment" to voluntarily separate for unsatisfactory performance. According to Army regulations, a "bar to reenlistment" is a mechanism whereby Army commanders may put enlistees on notice that they may not reenlist unless their performance improves. In December 1996, the Army changed this policy, no longer allowing such soldiers to voluntarily separate. As a result of this change in policy, the Army reports that its separations in this category dropped from 1,050 in fiscal year 1996 to 305 in fiscal year 1997.

Service officials told us that first-term enlistees may also be separated for unsatisfactory performance if they fail physical fitness tests. During our interviews with first-term enlistees, some told us that they were being separated because they had failed one part of the physical fitness test, such as the running portion or the sit-ups portion. Though we were told that alternate tests are available to certain enlistees, we spoke with enlistees who were being separated for failing the physical fitness test and did not know that such options existed or had not been offered alternate tests.

In the Air Force, an enlistee may be separated for unsatisfactory performance if he or she fails career development course tests.<sup>2</sup> Though

<sup>2</sup>Career development course tests are examinations that Air Force enlistees must pass to remain in their assigned occupations, or Air Force specialty codes.

Air Force policy permits commanders to allow enlistees to change jobs to stay in the Air Force after failing these tests, we found that commanders did not always make use of this alternative. The Air Force did not have data on how many enlistees were separated for failing their career development course tests or on how many were retained.

**Marine Corps and Navy Separate More Enlistees for Drug Use Than the Army and the Air Force**

For enlistees entering the services in fiscal year 1993, the Marine Corps and the Navy separated more persons between their 7th and 48th month for drug use than the other services did (see table 3.8).

**Table 3.8: Separations for Drug Use for Persons Who Enlisted in Fiscal Year 1993 and Were Separated Between Their 7th and 48th Month**

<b>Service</b>	<b>Number separated</b>	<b>Percentage of each service's separations</b>
Marine Corps	962	14.2
Navy	1,850	13.9
Air Force	239	3.6
Army	549	3.0

Differences in the services' proportions of drug separations might be explained by differences in their use of separation codes. Service officials also speculated that these differences might be explained at least in part by the frequency of drug testing. For example, according to Navy and Marine Corps officials, the Marine Corps tests its enlistees for drugs a little over 3 times per year; the Navy tests its enlistees 2.15 times per year; the Army 2 times per year; and the Air Force 0.75 times per year.

All four services take drug use very seriously. They all have mandatory requirements that such offenses are to be processed for separation, though such processing does not result in an automatic discharge for the offender. According to Navy, Army, and Air Force officials, these services have "zero tolerance" for drug use, and an enlistee is almost always separated after a first offense. The Marine Corps also has "zero tolerance" for drug use. However, two Marine Corps local commanders told us that they are beginning to reconsider the retention of one-time drug users. Conversely, officials in the Army appear to be considering actions that would result in the retention of fewer drug users.

While the Marine Corps separates a much higher percentage of its enlistees for drug use than the Air Force and the Army, two local Marine

Corps commanders told us that they were reviewing all separation packages and allowing certain enlistees to remain in the Marine Corps after their drug tests were positive. Each enlistee allowed a “second chance” was tracked closely to determine whether he or she successfully remained free of drugs. Both commanders who were granting second chances to drug users said that the Marine Corps has a monetary investment in enlistees who have been fully trained and are assigned to jobs. We interviewed two Marine Corps enlistees who had been given second chances after testing positive for drugs. The first enlistee said that a friend had put methamphetamines in his drink at a party without his knowledge. The second enlistee said that he had tried cocaine for the first time at a friend’s bachelor party.

The Army’s recent actions, on the other hand, indicate that it is becoming stricter with drug users. Its current policy allows local commanders to decide whether to retain first-time drug users if they have 3 years of service or less. However, the Army has drafted a policy that, if finalized, will make retention of drug users even rarer. The new policy, if implemented, will make it mandatory for commanders to initiate separation processing for all enlistees found to have used drugs, though commanders will still have the authority to retain these enlistees. Army officials at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, told us that they had begun to send drug users to jail, rather than allow them to simply separate. These officials believed that this more punitive action was sending the message to enlistees that taking drugs was not an easy way out of the service.

None of the services maintains data on how often drug users are retained. Because such data is not maintained, the services have no means of determining whether retaining enlistees found to have used drugs is an effective policy, that is, whether these enlistees represent good risks for either continuing to be productive servicemembers or for completing their first terms.

---

### Services Differ in Their Policies on Separations for Pregnancy

Female enlistees in all services may be separated if they become pregnant, and male and female enlistees may be separated for “parenthood” if they cannot adequately provide for their children while meeting their service obligations. For female enlistees who joined the services in fiscal year 1993, separations for pregnancy represented between one-fourth and one-third of all female separations. When separations for parenthood are added, this portion rises even further (see table 3.9).

**Chapter 3**  
**Official Reasons for Early Separations**

**Table 3.9: Pregnancy and Parenthood Separations for Female Enlistees Who Entered the Services in Fiscal Year 1993 and Were Separated Between Their 7th and 48th Month**

<b>Service</b>	<b>Number of separations for pregnancy</b>	<b>Percentage of all female separations</b>	<b>Number of separations for parenthood</b>	<b>Percentage of all female separations</b>	<b>Total separations for pregnancy and parenthood</b>	<b>Total percentage of all female separations</b>
Marine Corps	150	36.4	7	1.7	157	38.1
Army	1,010	26.9	443	11.8	1,453	38.7
Air Force	415	26.3	9	0.6	424	26.9
Navy	499	23.3	247	11.5	746	34.8

The services' policies regarding the separation of pregnant women differ. The Army and the Air Force allow pregnant women to separate at their own discretion, upon request. The Marine Corps and the Navy, on the other hand, place the decision of whether to separate pregnant women in the hands of the local commanders. That is, for Marine Corps and Navy women, automatic and voluntary separation for pregnancy is not an option. According to Marine Corps and Navy officials, the rationale behind their policies is that enlistees represent a recruiting and training investment and that the decision should be left up to the local commander.

At present, none of the services maintains data to support the effectiveness of either allowing all pregnant women to separate or leaving this decision up to local commanders. For example, the services do not maintain data on how many enlisted women become pregnant and voluntarily stay in the service to complete their first terms or, in the case of the Navy and the Marine Corps, the number of pregnant women who are required to stay in the service after their requests to separate are turned down. Without such data, the services will be unable to determine whether first-term enlisted women who become pregnant and remain in the service after being denied separation prove to be productive servicemembers who successfully complete their terms.

# Quality-of-Life Issues Appear to Be Demotivators for Completing Contractual Obligations for Military Service

---

In an attempt to find root causes for enlistees' early separations, we interviewed 254 first-term personnel and their supervisors. Many supervisors and first-term enlistees suggested that quality-of-life issues, such as a perceived erosion of benefits, pay, and advancement opportunities, coupled with long work hours and frequent deployments, may lie at the root of many separations. While our interviews do not comprise a representative, statistical sample of all first-term enlistees and clearly do not provide a basis for pointing out which quality-of-life improvements might lead to lower attrition rates, they do provide useful insights into underlying reasons for current attrition rates.

All four of the services survey their personnel on quality-of-life issues in some way. However, the services do not currently administer exit surveys to first-term enlisted personnel, and they have not used available survey information to help analyze the problem of first-term enlisted attrition. That is, there is currently no formalized mechanism for prioritizing the concerns of first-term personnel who are discharged early or allowing the services to direct their attention to improving quality-of-life issues that will have the most effect on reducing the attrition of first-term personnel.

---

## Perception Is That Military Benefits Are Eroding or Are Not Competitive With the Private Sector

Many enlistees expressed the general perception that military retirement and medical benefits are eroding and that their salaries are not competitive with those of the private sector. The sense that they could make more money in the civilian world was most prevalent in occupations with highly transferrable skills such as those involving computers. The perception that retirement benefits are eroding was another frequently expressed demotivator. This was particularly true when first-term enlistees worked side by side with enlistees who had entered the services before the retirement system was changed and whose retirement benefits were seen as clearly better. Finally, the sense that medical benefits were not as good as they used to be was expressed frequently as another reason that a career in the military was no longer as appealing.

---

## Further Career Opportunities Are Desired

Many enlistees expressed frustration with not having more opportunities for career advancement. Many said that they felt that advancement opportunities were limited, that they had few choices to cross-train for other occupations, and that they were not allowed to transfer to other locations. Some who had joined the military for college benefits said that their long work schedules and deployments prevented them from taking night courses toward obtaining a college degree.

One subgroup of Navy enlistees for whom career training appeared to be of particular concern was the general detail sailors. These sailors complete basic training and a 2.4-week apprenticeship course but do not attend a technical school that qualifies them for a Navy rating. According to Navy career counselors we interviewed, the Navy's policy of not sending these sailors to technical schools is a primary driver of first-term enlisted attrition. In fact, Navy data indicates that general detail sailors experience a higher-than-average attrition rate. For example, for enlistees entering the Navy between fiscal years 1989 and 1993, the overall first-term attrition rate ranged from 30.5 percent to 35.8 percent. The attrition rate for general detail sailors during these years, however, ranged from 39.3 percent to 43 percent.

---

## **Deployment Schedules Can Be Motivators or Demotivators**

Enlistees' feelings about their deployment schedules varied, depending on how frequently they were deployed and on whether they were married. In some cases, deployment appeared to be a motivator. Some enlistees complained that they had joined the service to see the world and had not been able to deploy at all. Marine Corps officials told us that they believed that first-term enlistees who deployed generally had higher morale, fewer disciplinary problems, and a greater sense of mission. Other enlistees expressed frustration with deployment, especially those in occupations that required extensive and frequent travel away from home. For example, one supervisor of enlisted personnel in an Air Force fighter squadron said that his unit's rigorous deployment schedule was the primary driver of enlisted attrition. He said that in one 18-month period, from June 1995 through December 1996, his entire squadron was deployed for 205 days. One-third to one-half of the squadron was deployed for an additional 134 days during this same period.

---

## **Perception Is That Married Enlistees Receive Preferential Treatment**

Single enlistees frequently complained that their married counterparts were treated preferentially because they received housing and subsistence allowances and were allowed to live and eat off base or off ships. Single enlistees believed that, because they lived and ate on base or aboard ship, they were more available and thus were required to perform extra duties. They also said that they did not have equal amounts of time off and privacy.

---

## **Results of Quality-of-Life Surveys Are Not Directly Tied to Efforts to Reduce First-Term Attrition**

All four services have developed surveys to collect information from servicemembers on their perceptions of the quality of military life. However, no service currently administers exit surveys to first-term enlisted personnel or targets the information it collects from these surveys to the problem of first-term enlisted attrition and ways to reduce it.

The Army currently administers two surveys to its personnel. First, commanders may administer a "Command Climate Survey" when they assume a new position, but they have the option of keeping the results confidential. Second, the Army Research Institute has administered a "Sample Survey of Military Personnel" to Army officers and enlisted personnel twice a year since 1943. The latest survey results, from the spring of 1997, indicate that 52.2 percent of all enlisted personnel are satisfied or very satisfied with the overall quality of Army life. Only 28.9 percent of enlisted personnel, however, were satisfied or very satisfied with their amount of basic pay, and only 28.1 percent were satisfied or very satisfied with their retirement benefits. Two other areas in which around one-third of enlistees expressed that they were satisfied or very satisfied were in (1) the number of personnel available to do the work (35.9 percent) and (2) the opportunity to select a job, training, or station of their choice (32.8 percent).

In 1994 and 1995, the Army administered an exit survey to its personnel, but this effort was discontinued because Army officials believed that the survey duplicated the Army's other two surveys. The Army Research Institute is in the process of developing another survey to be administered to all recruits as they enter basic training and as they either separate from training or continue on to their first duty stations. Data collection for this effort is expected to begin in January 1999.

The Navy has administered a "Retention/Separation Questionnaire" to its personnel every year since fiscal year 1990. The questionnaire asks officers and enlisted personnel to rate their satisfaction with 45 aspects of Navy life and to identify the most important reason for leaving or thinking of leaving the Navy. The 1997 results showed that the top six reasons that Navy personnel cited for leaving or thinking of leaving the Navy were (1) lack of promotion and advancement opportunity, (2) family separation, (3) low basic pay, (4) quality of leadership/management, (5) quality of Navy life, and (6) lack of fairness in performance evaluations.

The Air Force has administered a "Climate and Quality of Life Survey" to its officer and enlisted personnel every year since 1995. The survey

---

**Chapter 4**  
**Quality-of-Life Issues Appear to Be**  
**Demotivators for Completing Contractual**  
**Obligations for Military Service**

---

contains questions on a variety of issues, including how many days are spent away from home, how many hours personnel work each week, and how personnel perceive the fairness of their pay and benefits. The Air Force's latest survey, for 1997, indicates that 69 percent of all first-term enlisted personnel believe that the Air Force is a good place to work. However, a summary of the survey results states that the percentage of enlisted personnel who report that they plan to stay in the Air Force until they are eligible to retire dropped from 64 percent in 1995 to 58 percent in 1997. The average number of temporary duty days increased in this time period from 46 days per year to 60 days per year. The average number of work hours per week rose from 46 hours in 1996 to 49 in 1997. Only 28 percent of all first-term enlisted personnel believe that their pay and benefits are fair and equitable. Forty-four percent of all married enlisted personnel and 45 percent of all single enlisted personnel are satisfied with their medical benefits. When asked which of the programs, services, and facilities had the most positive influence on career intent, enlisted personnel tended to identify tuition assistance and Air Force-sponsored off-duty educational opportunities.

Finally, the Navy Personnel Research and Development Center administered a survey in 1993 for the Marine Corps on quality-of-life issues. This survey, which contained questions on servicemembers' perceptions of their residences, incomes, standards of living, and other things, was given to a sample of all active-duty Marine Corps personnel except those in the lowest pay grade, E-1. Overall, survey results showed that junior enlisted personnel were more negative on all measures of quality of life than members of other pay grades. For example, unmarried junior enlisted personnel, who are most likely to live in the barracks, had the lowest scores of all ranks on questions about satisfaction with housing. Junior enlisted personnel also had the lowest scores for satisfaction with their incomes. While current deployment status was not a factor in determining how members felt about their jobs, junior enlisted personnel reported fewer positive feelings about their jobs than did senior enlisted members and officers.

The Marine Corps has discontinued this questionnaire while the Center for Naval Analyses develops a new "Climate Battery Survey." The new survey will be divided into two parts, one on retention issues and a second one on separation issues. The Marine Corps plans to require all active-duty personnel to complete the separation portion of the survey before they leave the Marine Corps.

---

# Services' Actions to Reduce First-Term Attrition

---

Historically, the services have focused their efforts to reduce attrition on recruiting high school graduates with high scores on aptitude tests because these types of enlistees have lower attrition rates. Because the majority of all recruits are now high school graduates with high aptitude scores, the services must now focus on increasing the proportion of these enlistees who complete their first terms. The services have taken some steps to address attrition, such as encouraging commanders to examine opportunities to review separation packages, setting numerical goals for reducing attrition, and restricting certain voluntary and early separations. However, only rarely have these efforts been driven by an analysis of (1) exactly why attrition is occurring and (2) what separation policies might be changed to reduce the attrition of specific categories of enlistees.

Two studies suggest that positive leadership, such as the services' greater command emphasis on reducing attrition, has the direct effect of lowering attrition. While we spoke with local service commanders who are now reviewing separations packages to reconsider the possibility of retaining enlistees, we also spoke with first-term supervisors who continue to believe that a "zero defects" mentality remains a driver of attrition. These supervisors also told us that many enlistees continue to take advantage of separation policies to seek easy ways out of the military with minimal consequences.

---

## The Services' Targeting of High School Graduates With High Aptitude Test Scores Has Met Its Limit in Controlling Attrition

Historically, the services have focused on the recruitment of high quality personnel to minimize the time required for individual training and to reduce attrition. They have defined "high quality" recruits as young people who are high school diploma graduates and score in the upper 50th percentile of the AFQT.

Our analysis of data on all enlistees who entered the services in fiscal year 1993 indicates that attrition rates continue to be lower for persons with higher educational levels. For example, those who entered the services in fiscal year 1993 with high school diplomas had an attrition rate of 35 percent. On the other hand, those with 3 to 4 years of high school but no diploma or general equivalency degree had a rate of 51.1 percent, and those holding general equivalency degrees had an attrition rate of 54.8 percent. Similarly, enlistees who score progressively higher on the AFQT continue to have decreasing rates of attrition. Those who scored in the highest AFQT category, category I, scores of 93 to 99, had an attrition rate of 27.5 percent. Those in category II, scores of 65 to 92, had an attrition rate of 32.4 percent; those in category IIIA, scores of 50 to 64, had

a rate of 37.6 percent; and those in category IIIB, scores of 31 to 49, had a rate of 40 percent. (More data on attrition rates by educational level and AFQT score is contained in app. I.)

Overall attrition rates for first-term enlistees now reflect the fact that the vast majority of the services' recruits hold high school diplomas and score in the upper half of the AFQT. For example, of all enlistees entering the services in fiscal year 1993, 91.5 percent held high school diplomas, and 71.1 percent scored in the upper half of the AFQT. For these reasons, DOD's overall attrition rate of 35.8 percent closely approximates the attrition rates of high school diploma graduates (35 percent) and persons who score in category IIIA of the AFQT (37.6 percent). All these statistics indicate that if DOD and the services did not target these higher quality recruits, attrition rates would almost certainly be higher. Efforts to reduce attrition rates below current levels need to be focused on finding ways to increase the likelihood that these already high-quality enlistees will complete their first terms.

---

## Services Have Made Few Formal Policy Changes to Reduce Attrition After Training

Although all four services hope to reduce their first-term attrition rates, they have made few formal policy changes to target enlistees who have completed training. The Air Force and the Army have set specific numeric targets for reducing attrition, and the Air Force, the Army, and the Marine Corps report that they have been successful in reducing attrition in some areas. However, only two services have targeted groups of enlistees they wished to reconsider for remedial action after training. The Army has targeted enlistees with bars to reenlistment who were previously allowed to voluntarily separate, and the Air Force has targeted persons allowed to voluntarily separate in the "miscellaneous" category, which includes enlistees allowed to separate early to take outside employment. In these two cases, the services will be able to measure the effect of their policy changes. Other service efforts have not similarly been linked to clearly identified problems. As a result, any success these efforts experience in lowering attrition may be either coincidental or have the unintended effect of retaining enlistees who really should be separated.

---

## Air Force Hopes to Reduce "Miscellaneous" Separations

In an effort to reduce first-term attrition, the Air Force has encouraged its commanders to look carefully at voluntary separation packages to reconsider retaining enlistees. It has also set numerical targets for reducing attrition rates. Specifically, the Air Force has issued a message to its commanders emphasizing the importance of restricting the numbers of

persons allowed to be released in the “miscellaneous” category. Persons placed in this category include enlistees allowed to separate early to take other employment, as well as enlistees released for reasons not included in the Air Force’s list of separation codes. A successful reduction of this category could have an important impact, as this reason for separation represents 31 percent of all male and 23 percent of all female discharges. However, the Air Force will first have to analyze more fully who makes up this group and why they are being allowed to separate early.

Other than targeting this one type of separation, the Air Force has issued no other guidance to its commanders on ways to reduce the attrition of first-term personnel. Specifically, the Air Force has not issued guidance to commanders that would assist them in identifying exactly what types of cases should be reviewed or what accommodations should be made to encourage more enlistees to complete their first terms.

The Air Force’s target is to reduce its overall first-term attrition from the current rate of 32.5 percent to 27 percent. The Air Force has separated its target into two parts. First, it hopes to reduce attrition during basic training from its peak of 11 percent to 7 percent. Second, it hopes to reduce attrition after basic training by 5 percentage points—to 20 percent—from a peak of 25 percent for enlistees entering the Air Force in fiscal years 1991 and 1992. The Air Force plans to reevaluate these targets each year. While setting such numeric targets sends a clear and positive message to Air Force commanders about the importance of lowering attrition, Air Force officials provided us with no evidence that Air Force commanders had been asked to document what actions they take that are successful. Such documentation would allow the Air Force to apply successful methods to other units.

---

### **Army Plans to Retain More Enlistees Experiencing Performance Problems**

In December 1996, the Chief of Staff of the Army directed Army leaders to reexamine their procedures to ensure that they were doing everything possible to reduce first-term attrition. The Army has also set numerical targets for reducing attrition. According to Army officials, however, the only formal policy change is that the Army no longer allows enlistees with bars to reenlistment to separate voluntarily. Like the Air Force, the Army hopes that calling its local commanders’ attention to the importance of retaining first-term personnel will result in lower attrition. Again, while we believe that such attention is critical, we could not identify any specific guidance to the commanders as to how they should go about retaining enlistees other than those with bars to reenlistment.

In December 1996, the Army set the following numeric goals for reducing first-term attrition:

- To reduce fiscal year 1996 rates by 10 percent by the end of fiscal year 1997. This would mean that the Army's 37-percent rate would be reduced to 34 percent.
- To reduce fiscal year 1996 rates by 20 percent by the end of fiscal year 1998. This would reduce the attrition rate to 30 percent.
- To reduce fiscal year 1996 rates by 33 percent by the end of fiscal year 2003. This would reduce the attrition rate to 25 percent.

The Army reports that it has met its goal for fiscal year 1997. However, officials report that first-term attrition rates have leveled off, and the Army is now reassessing what its long-term goal should be. Its tentative, revised goal is to reduce the rate to 30 percent by 2003. On July 31, 1998, the Army's Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel outlined acceptable ranges for training attrition. These ranges were intended to be used not as attrition ceilings but rather as indicators. The Army's focus, again, was on emphasizing the importance of rehabilitating and instilling values in its personnel.

---

### **Marine Corps Has Begun a Unit Cohesion Program to Improve Morale and Thereby Reduce Attrition**

While the Marine Corps has not established a numerical goal for the reduction of first-term enlisted attrition, local commanders we spoke with expressed their concerns about first-term attrition and cited their efforts to reconsider discharging enlistees in their units. Like the Army and the Air Force, however, Marine Corps officials cited only one formal policy initiative that they believe may reduce the attrition of enlistees between their 7th and 48th month of service. The Marine Corps calls this initiative a "unit cohesion" program. Under this program, some enlistees have begun to train and serve their first terms in groups of 2 to 13 people, depending on the military occupational specialty.

Though the primary purpose of this program is to promote a greater sense of teamwork among Marine Corps enlistees, Marine Corps officials believe that the resulting higher morale will encourage more enlistees to complete their first terms of service. While we agree that unit cohesion may have a positive effect on lowering attrition, this effort is not directly linked to the primary reasons for separation in the Marine Corps—medical problems, misconduct, and drug use for men and pregnancy and medical problems for women.

The Marine Corps has other initiatives to reduce first-term enlisted attrition, but these are aimed at separations before enlistees have completed their initial 6 months of service. These initiatives include (1) increasing the amount of time that recruiters spend with their recruits to improve their physical fitness and (2) restructuring recruit training to add more core values training and a field event to the end of the basic training period.

---

### **Navy Has Made No Formal Policy Changes to Reduce Attrition After Training**

The Navy hopes to reduce first-term attrition, and Navy officials said that initiatives for reducing attrition are aimed at the time enlistees spend in training, because this is the period in which increases in attrition have occurred. Among other things, Navy efforts to reduce attrition have been focused on increasing their recruiters' interaction with recruits before they attend basic training and on improving physical training and student/instructor ratios during training.

Navy officials cited no policy changes intended to reduce the numbers of enlistees separated after training. Neither has the Navy set numerical targets for reducing attrition rates.

---

### **Evidence Shows That Positive Leadership May Result in Lower Attrition**

There is some evidence that positive leadership, such as the type of command emphasis the services are placing on reexamining the separation of enlistees, could have a positive effect. However, during our interviews with first-term enlistees and their supervisors, some continue to believe that there is a "zero defects" mentality in the services. That is, they believe that the services are not willing to work with a servicemember at any pay grade to give him or her a chance at rehabilitation. This mentality appears to be related to what some researchers have observed is the "volunteer in, volunteer out" philosophy that came about when the draft ended. During the draft era, some researchers have commented, commanders believed that enlistees had an obligation to fulfill and were more likely to work with enlistees experiencing motivational problems. With the advent of the all-volunteer force, on the other hand, commanders became less patient with below-average enlistees and were more likely to separate them. One obvious result of this change in philosophy was a rise in attrition after the draft ended.

There is some evidence that positive leadership, including the motivation of enlistees who have the potential to be rehabilitated, has a direct effect on lowering attrition. For example, in 1984, an Army Training and Doctrine

Command (TRADOC) study of attrition during training found that “trainee performance is nearly always a function of cadre leadership.” During the Command team’s visits to training sites, it found that

units with lower attrition demonstrated concern for the individual, expected trainees to meet standards, and were generally working to produce “a soldier I’d accept in a . . . unit.” Cadres in units with higher TDP [Trainee Discharge Program] rates tended to be more concerned with statistical accomplishments, fulfilling the traditional drill sergeant role, and “weeding out the duds.” They emphasized graduating “the best soldier in the United States Army” or “one I’d be proud to have in a . . . unit.” Their philosophy produced standards beyond the norm.

The TRADOC team also found lower attrition rates in units that had higher numbers of senior grade noncommissioned officers and effective buddy systems.

A 1988 Rand study also suggested that management policies have an effect on attrition and reported that the Army’s attrition rates decreased immediately after the TRADOC study called attention to the issues of Army leadership.<sup>1</sup> The Rand study compared enlistees with similar educational levels and AFQT scores and found that the attrition of these groups depended on what geographical locations they were assigned to. The study concluded that the differences in attrition rates of similarly qualified enlistees suggest that “factors such as institutional policies and practices may have a critical effect on attrition levels.” The study noted that after the TRADOC study was completed and the Army had begun to focus on attrition, the Army’s attrition rates decreased in fiscal year 1985, resulting in the retention of 4 percent more high quality men and 6 percent more high quality women.

---

<sup>1</sup>Richard Buddin, Trends in Attrition of High-Quality Military Recruits (Santa Monica, California: Rand Corporation, Aug. 1988).

---

**Services Do Not  
Provide Sufficiently  
Punitive Discharges to  
Prevent Enlistees  
From Seeking  
Separation**

During March 1998 testimony before the Senate Committee on Armed Services' Subcommittee on Personnel, a panel of recruiters stressed the importance of making new enlistees more aware of the commitment they make in signing contracts for military service.<sup>2</sup> They expressed the opinion that it is too easy for enlistees to get out of their service commitments. One Army recruiter, for example, said, "Sometimes we have got to hold them, hold their feet to the fire, so to speak, a little longer, and I think in the end they would be happy."

Our analysis of official reasons for separation and our interviews with first-term enlistees confirm that some enlistees who are now being separated might be retained if they faced stricter disincentives for early separation. Some enlistees who may now be seeking "escape routes" by reporting medical problems; committing minor disciplinary infractions; or failing their physical training, career development tests, or weight standards are now able to separate early and easily with honorable discharges. One Army unit we visited had already begun to attempt to close these easy ways out of the service by imposing more punitive measures for behavior such as drug use. We do not believe that current characterizations of service for enlistees whose behavior does not meet standards provide adequate incentives for such enlistees to complete their first terms.

---

<sup>2</sup>Hearing to Receive Testimony on Recruiting and Retention Policies Within the Department of Defense and the Military Services in Review of the Defense Authorization Request for Fiscal Year 1999 and the Future Years Defense Program, March 4, 1998.

---

# Conclusions and Recommendations

---

The services have been experiencing first-term attrition rates of about one-third for over a decade. During this time, the services have targeted their recruiting efforts toward enlisting high school diploma graduates who score in the upper half of the AFQT because they have lower attrition rates than recruits without these qualifications. This group continues to show lower attrition rates than other recruit groups. However, because the overwhelming majority of all recruits are now high school diploma graduates with high AFQT scores, the services must turn their efforts to encouraging more of their high-quality enlistees to complete their first terms. Reducing attrition rates will be complex and difficult. However, considering the cost of recruiting and training the thousands of enlistees who do not complete their first terms of service, the payoff of reducing attrition will be significant, since savings could then be channeled to other defense priorities.

In reducing attrition, a first and critical step is for DOD to obtain more complete data on the magnitude of its losses. We believe that all separations—including voluntary releases more than 90 days early—need to be reported so that DOD and the services have a fuller and more accurate picture of their turnover rates. We are not suggesting that voluntary early release programs were not cost-effective downsizing tools. Rather, we believe that early releases should be managed and reported along with other types of first-term attrition. Releases more than 90 days early clearly result in a loss in the services' recruiting and training investment.

Second, collecting better data on why enlistees are being separated is key to the services' ability to craft policies that increase the proportion of first-term personnel who complete their contractual obligations. In our 1997 report on attrition from basic training, we made recommendations to DOD and the services on ways to improve the use of separation codes to build a database for DOD to manage attrition. These recommendations were included in the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1998 (P.L. 105-85), and DOD is now working to implement them. Our current work reaffirms the fact that separation codes are used inconsistently by the services and that these codes are not specific enough to capture exactly why separations are occurring. The assignment of these codes requires a degree of subjective judgment. This subjectivity may mask true reasons for separation and make it more difficult to analyze why attrition is occurring and to determine what can be done to decrease it.

Third, data now available on the quality-of-life issues underlying attrition is not tied to the services' efforts to prevent the attrition of first-term

enlistees. If the services could use the data they collect from their several surveys on the quality of military life to prioritize first-term enlistees' concerns, they could focus their attention on improvements that would have the most impact on reducing the attrition of first-term personnel.

We believe that all the services are concerned about attrition and that service leaders are conveying this concern to their local commanders. Two services, the Army and the Air Force, have even set numerical goals for reducing first-term attrition. However, while there is research to support the positive effect of such command emphasis on finding ways to get more high-quality personnel to complete their first terms, we believe that setting numerical goals for reducing attrition without complete information on its underlying causes or guidance on what specific actions should be taken to reduce it may turn these goals into arbitrary ceilings.

While command emphasis on attrition is critical to the services' efforts to reduce it, this emphasis must be linked to clear policy changes that target specific groups of enlistees the services wish to retain. Better guidance to commanders on what actions should be taken to deal with identified problems or what accommodations could be made to retain certain categories of enlistees is also needed. The Army's recent decision to rehabilitate enlistees with bars to reenlistment is one example of a successful policy change to reduce attrition. In this case, Army commanders targeted a group of enlistees they wished to retain—primarily those with performance problems—and made formal policy changes to do so. The Army will now be able to measure the effects of its policy change in terms of how many more enlistees it was able to retain and why.

Our interviews with first-term enlistees, supervisors, and service officials indicate that other types of enlistees could be targeted for remedial action if specific mitigating actions are taken. For example, enlistees who commit minor disciplinary infractions, who fail physical fitness or career development tests, who are one-time drug users, or who become pregnant may simply need to be provided further counseling, optional testing, other job choices, or remedial training by their commissioned or noncommissioned officers.

Finally, granting honorable discharges to enlistees who deliberately seek ways out of fulfilling their service commitments simply encourages others to do likewise. One Army unit we visited had already begun to attempt to close these "escape routes" and impose more punitive measures against

---

certain enlistees, particularly those found to use drugs. We believe that some enlistees could be motivated to remain in the service if they knew that there were no easy ways out of their contracts and that serious negative consequences were associated with behavior or performance that warranted discharge.

---

## Recommendations

To capture more accurately the numbers of enlisted personnel separated before the end of their first terms, we recommend that the Secretary of Defense direct the service secretaries to include as a separate category the numbers of first-term personnel released more than 90 days before the end of their contract terms when they report first-term attrition rates. In order to provide more information on what factors are related to first-term attrition, we recommend that the Secretary of Defense direct the service secretaries to use existing quality-of-life surveys or create new ones to (1) collect information on the factors contributing to first-term enlistees' separation and (2) identify quality-of-life initiatives aimed at reducing the attrition of first-term personnel.

To retain as many first-term enlistees as possible, we recommend that the Secretary of Defense direct the service secretaries to take the following actions:

- Continually emphasize to all commissioned and noncommissioned officers the costs of first-term attrition, the difficulty of acquiring new enlistees to replace early losses, and the importance of providing positive leadership in targeting first-term enlistees who could be encouraged to complete their contractual obligations.
- Collect more complete data on specific groups of enlistees whom the services wish to target for remedial action and issue guidance and formal policy changes to local commanders indicating what specific actions—such as more counseling, optional testing, further job choices, or remedial training—can be taken to prevent the early discharge of these targeted groups. Possibilities for targeting include enlistees being separated for minor disciplinary infractions, failure to pass physical fitness tests and career development tests, one-time drug use, and pregnancy.
- Reassess the appropriateness of providing favorable types of discharge to enlistees whose behavior or performance led to their early separation and ensure that proper incentives exist to encourage enlistees to complete their first terms.

---

## Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

In commenting on a draft of this report, DOD concurred with our findings and recommendations. (DOD's comments are presented in their entirety in app. III.) In an overall comment, DOD stated that our focus on the early separation of enlistees who entered the services in fiscal year 1993 might make it appear that attrition rates are higher than they really are because the persons in this group enlisted at the peak of military downsizing. As we state in our report, we concentrated our detailed analysis on this group of enlistees because they represented the group for whom the latest data was available 48 months after enlistment. We agree that the services might have been more willing to release first-term enlistees early during this period of downsizing. However, it should be noted that the peak of downsizing did not occur in fiscal year 1993. Rather, by fiscal year 1993, DOD was well into the downward trend in its force structure that had begun in the late 1980s.

In concurring with our recommendations, DOD agreed to direct the services to (1) review their 90-day release policies and the exceptions granted to those policies, (2) prepare a report on quality-of-life issues that could be addressed to reduce attrition, (3) provide local commanders with guidance and formal policy changes related to specific types of attrition the services target for remedial action, (4) reassess the appropriateness of providing favorable types of discharges to enlistees whose behavior or performance led to their early separation to ensure that proper incentives exist to encourage enlistees to complete their first terms, and (5) prepare a report by October 1999 documenting service initiatives related to our recommendations.

---

---

# Attrition Rates by Demographics

**Table I.1: 48-Month Attrition Rates by Education Level for Enlistees Who Entered the Services in Fiscal Year 1993**

Figures in percentages

Education level	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force	All services
3-4 years of high school, with no diploma or general equivalency degree	54.2	51.6	38.0	37.8	51.1
High school diploma	38.6	34.6	31.1	32.5	35.0
General equivalency degree	56.0	54.9	51.5	45.9	54.8
Alternate education credential <sup>a</sup>	52.2	50.0	38.6	38.5	48.2

<sup>a</sup>Persons who receive home study diplomas are included in the category of those holding "alternate educational credentials." In fiscal year 1993, the services enlisted 85 persons who had home school diplomas. Though their numbers are too small for meaningful interpretations, their attrition rate was 35.3 percent.

**Table I.2: 48-Month Attrition Rates by Armed Forces Qualification Test Category and Score for Enlistees Who Entered the Services in Fiscal Year 1993**

Figures in percentages

AFQT category and score	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force	All services
Category III B (31-49)	42.8	40.1	35.1	39.1	40.0
Category III A (50-64)	41.9	37.2	32.3	33.9	37.6
Category II (65-92)	35.6	32.4	28.5	29.5	32.4
Category I (93-99)	29.5	28.4	22.6	25.0	27.5

Note: Attrition rates for enlistees in the Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT) category IV C (with scores ranging from 10-15), category IV B (with scores ranging from 16-20), and category IV A (with scores ranging from 21-30) were not included in the table because their numbers were too small to show meaningful patterns. For example, in fiscal year 1993, the services enlisted only 2 persons in category IV C; 8 persons in category IV B; and 1,612 persons in category IV A.

**Table I.3: 48-Month Attrition Rates by Age at Enlistment for Enlistees Entering the Services in Fiscal Year 1993**

Figures in percentages

Age at enlistment	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force	All services
17	38.5	37.3	31.6	34.0	36.2
18	38.7	33.6	28.4	32.5	33.8
19	42.0	36.9	32.6	34.3	37.4
20	41.2	38.2	34.6	34.0	38.1
21	40.5	35.3	33.4	31.9	36.6
22	38.4	35.6	35.3	27.7	35.3
23	34.6	35.3	39.9	28.8	34.3
24 and above	35.4	37.2	38.2	28.8	35.2

**Appendix I**  
**Attrition Rates by Demographics**

**Table I.4: 48-Month Attrition Rates for Male and Female Enlistees Entering the Services in Fiscal Year 1993**

Figures in percentages		
<b>Service</b>	<b>Female attrition rate</b>	<b>Male attrition rate</b>
Army	51.5	37.0
Navy	39.2	35.3
Marine Corps	49.1	30.7
Air Force	37.9	30.9
All services	44.5	34.4

**Table I.5: 48-Month Attrition Rates by Race/Ethnic Group for Enlistees Entering the Services in Fiscal Year 1993**

Figures in percentages					
<b>Race/ethnic group</b>	<b>Army</b>	<b>Navy</b>	<b>Marine Corps</b>	<b>Air Force</b>	<b>All services</b>
White	40.8	36.6	32.2	33.1	36.7
Black	38.1	37.8	35.1	32.1	37.0
Hispanic	29.7	30.1	24.0	24.0	28.1
American Indian/ Alaskan Native	45.0	38.2	32.6	39.3	39.4
Asian/ Pacific Islander	29.1	19.9	22.7	25.8	24.3
Other	37.3	32.1	26.4	32.9	32.6

Note: The small numbers of enlistees in three of these subgroups may limit analysis of these statistics. For example, for enlistees entering the services in fiscal year 1993, 1,287 were categorized as "Other"; 1,459 were American Indian/Alaskan Native; and 4,487 were Asian/Pacific Islanders. On the other hand, 146,568 were white; 33,782 were black; and 15,325 were Hispanic.

# Attrition Rates by Occupation

**Table II.1: Army Attrition by DOD Primary Occupation**

<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Number of enlistees entering in fiscal years 1989-93</b>	<b>Number who separated early</b>	<b>Attrition rate (percent)</b>
Precision Equipment	32	19	59.4
Radio and Radio Code	6,525	3,244	49.7
Teletype and Cryptographic Equipment	1,047	428	40.9
Food Service	11,541	4,665	40.4
Metalworking	1,410	534	37.9
Artillery/Gunnery, Rockets, and Missiles	30,398	11,130	36.6
Missile Mechanical and Electrical	1,230	448	36.4
Weather	216	76	35.2
Personal Service	668	233	34.9
Construction	5,218	1,817	34.8
Wire Communications	3,202	1,102	34.4
Motor Transport	11,006	3,727	33.9
Religious, Morale and Welfare	1,086	361	33.2
Infantry	61,769	20,493	33.2
Administration	10,166	3,342	32.9
Law Enforcement	14,889	4,883	32.8
Fabric, Leather, and Rubber	232	76	32.8
Mapping, Surveying, Drafting, and Illustrating	1,743	568	32.6
Medical Administration and Logistics	2,147	693	32.3
Information and Education	473	152	32.1
Seamanship	664	213	32.1
Utilities	1,369	438	32.0
Material Receipt, Storage and Issue	7,934	2,517	31.7
Dental Care	1,754	553	31.5
Technical Specialists, N.E.C.	5,225	1,647	31.5
Lithography	325	102	31.4
Communications Center Operations	8,633	2,703	31.3
Armor and Amphibious	11,765	3,645	31.0
Combat Engineering	13,050	4,043	31.0
Armament and Munitions	6,689	2,056	30.7
Other Functional Support	23,731	7,260	30.6
Other Mechanical and Electrical Equipment	1,185	362	30.6
Automotive	30,115	9,152	30.4
Radar and Air Traffic Control	1,551	468	30.2
Fire Control Electronic Systems (Non-Missile)	295	89	30.2

(continued)

**Appendix II  
Attrition Rates by Occupation**

<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Number of enlistees entering in fiscal years 1989-93</b>	<b>Number who separated early</b>	<b>Attrition rate (percent)</b>
Personnel	7,931	2,374	29.9
Medical Care	21,932	6,563	29.9
Other Electronic Equipment	886	260	29.4
Combat Operations Control	15,660	4,535	29.0
ADP Computers	520	148	28.5
Power Generating Equipment	6,017	1,706	28.4
Accounting, Finance and Disbursing	2,270	643	28.3
Data Processing	1,751	494	28.2
Missile Guidance, Control and Checkout	1,853	521	28.1
Biomedical Sciences and Allied Health	3,100	870	28.1
Ancillary Medical Support	3,465	960	27.7
Forward Area Equipment Support	1,213	329	27.1
Aircraft and Aircraft Related	8,292	1,974	23.8
Shipboard Propulsion	319	75	23.5
Photography	800	175	21.9
Signal Intelligence/ Electronic Warfare	6,591	1,424	21.6
Radio/Radar	16,349	3,470	21.2
Intelligence	5,474	1,057	19.3
Musicians	853	129	15.1
Ordnance Disposal and Diving	498	41	8.2

**Appendix II  
Attrition Rates by Occupation**

**Table II.2: Navy Attrition by DOD Primary Occupation**

<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Number of enlistees entering in fiscal years 1989-93</b>	<b>Number who separated early</b>	<b>Attrition rate (percent)</b>
Missile Guidance, Control and Checkout	18,164	7,106	39.1
Food Service	10,970	3,272	29.8
Seamanship	25,189	7,205	28.6
Material Receipt, Storage and Issue	2,026	567	28.0
Other Craftworkers, N.E.C.	8,224	2,116	25.7
Construction	3,808	971	25.5
Radio and Radio Code	8,438	2,026	24.0
Lithography	298	71	23.8
Teletype and Cryptographic Equipment	1,020	237	23.2
Automotive	952	218	22.9
Sonar Equipment	4,424	1,008	22.8
Dental Care	2,521	570	22.6
Shipboard Propulsion	22,061	4,906	22.2
Air Crew	10,546	2,297	21.8
Forward Area Equipment Support	976	212	21.7
Radar and Air Traffic Control	10,888	2,315	21.3
Armament and Munitions	4,766	961	20.2
Photography	656	130	19.8
Data Processing	1,446	286	19.8
Wire Communications	3,123	616	19.7
Artillery/Gunnery, Rockets, and Missiles	3,032	595	19.6
Medical Care	15,298	2,809	18.4
Personnel	3,552	625	17.6
Personal Service	1,262	220	17.4
Administration	6,947	1,198	17.2
Precision Equipment	1,051	178	16.9
Other Functional Support	10,707	1,790	16.7
Utilities	2,174	362	16.7
Accounting, Finance and Disbursing	1,358	224	16.5
Metalworking	4,634	756	16.3
Information and Education	366	59	16.1
Religious, Morale and Welfare	633	98	15.5
Weather	1,019	156	15.3
Radio/Radar	13,595	1,931	14.2
ADP Computers	1,635	229	14.0

(continued)

**Appendix II  
Attrition Rates by Occupation**

<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Number of enlistees entering in fiscal years 1989-93</b>	<b>Number who separated early</b>	<b>Attrition rate (percent)</b>
Fire Control Electronic Systems (Non-Missile)	2,334	325	13.9
Aircraft and Aircraft Related	27,581	3,793	13.8
Power Generating Equipment	15,989	2,015	12.6
Signal Intelligence/Electronic Warfare	4,940	598	12.1
Communications Center Operations	1,504	182	12.1
Other Electronic Equipment	1,680	179	10.7
Intelligence	1,099	94	8.6
Sonar	1,083	84	7.8
Armor and Amphibious	28	2	7.1
Combat Operations Control	66	4	6.1
Motor Transport	36	2	5.6
Ancillary Medical Support	2,665	145	5.4
Combat Engineering	19	1	5.3
Other Mechanical and Electrical Equipment	887	45	5.1
Musicians	332	15	4.5
Biomedical Sciences and Allied Health	654	28	4.3
Mapping, Surveying, Drafting, and Illustrating	91	3	3.3
Law Enforcement	582	19	3.3
Industrial Gas and Fuel Production	224	4	1.8
Ordnance Disposal and Diving	729	10	1.4
Infantry	659	8	1.2
Technical Specialists, N.E.C.	147	1	0.7
Installation Security	1,510	4	0.3

**Appendix II  
Attrition Rates by Occupation**

**Table II.3: Air Force Attrition by DOD Primary Occupation**

<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Number of enlistees entering in fiscal years 1989-93</b>	<b>Number who separated early</b>	<b>Attrition rate (percent)</b>
Religious, Morale and Welfare	336	152	45.2
Fire Control Electronic Systems (Non-Missile)	48	18	37.5
Lithography	173	56	32.4
Nuclear Weapons Equipment	500	160	32.0
Material Receipt, Storage and Issue	4,161	1,296	31.2
Metalworking	742	215	29.0
Food Service	3,767	1,086	28.8
Missile Mechanical and Electrical	1,027	264	25.7
Motor Transport	2,328	598	25.7
Construction	3,366	845	25.1
Photography	818	204	24.9
Law Enforcement	4,971	1,221	24.6
Utilities	4,532	1,111	24.5
Forward Area Equipment Support	1,077	261	24.2
Armament and Munitions	7,641	1,848	24.2
Personnel	2,803	668	23.8
Medical Care	6,176	1,465	23.7
Fabric, Leather, and Rubber	732	172	23.5
Biomedical Sciences and Allied Health	1,805	423	23.4
Installation Security	9,113	2,102	23.1
Technical Specialists, N.E.C.	3,527	807	22.9
Automotive	2,183	495	22.7
Dental Care	1,669	372	22.3
Administration	5,817	1,293	22.2
Medical Administration and Logistics	2,296	504	22.0
Accounting, Finance and Disbursing	1,772	381	21.5
Wire Communications	1,615	346	21.4
Other Functional Support	14,080	2,973	21.1
Missile Guidance, Control and Checkout	918	192	20.9
Radar and Air Traffic Control	2,596	533	20.5
Weather	1,286	262	20.4
Power Generating Equipment	691	139	20.1
Aircraft and Aircraft Related	22,763	4,504	19.8
Signal Intelligence/Electronic Warfare	3,367	639	19.0
Radio and Radio Code	1,704	323	19.0

(continued)

**Appendix II  
Attrition Rates by Occupation**

<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Number of enlistees entering in fiscal years 1989-93</b>	<b>Number who separated early</b>	<b>Attrition rate (percent)</b>
Mapping, Surveying, Drafting, and Illustrating	833	157	18.9
Teletype and Cryptographic Equipment	899	169	18.8
Ancillary Medical Support	2,378	445	18.7
Data Processing	5,679	1,062	18.7
Infantry	489	89	18.2
Combat Operations Control	1,076	192	17.8
Other Electronic Equipment	4,596	813	17.7
Radio/Radar	8,820	1,491	16.9
Intelligence	1,005	164	16.3
Ordnance Disposal and Diving	324	50	15.4
ADP Computers	1,334	203	15.2
Information and Education	367	52	14.2
Air Crew	1,150	161	14.0
Musicians	255	34	13.3
Artillery/Gunnery, Rockets, and Missiles	48	1	2.1

**Appendix II  
Attrition Rates by Occupation**

**Table II.4: Marine Corps Attrition by DOD Primary Occupation**

<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Number of enlistees entering in fiscal years 1989-93</b>	<b>Number who separated early</b>	<b>Attrition rate (percent)</b>
Religious, Morale and Welfare	57	16	28.1
Food Service	3,047	798	26.2
Material Receipt, Storage and Issue	4,393	1,035	23.6
Motor Transport	7,688	1,785	23.2
Clerical/Personnel	1,610	365	22.7
Metalworking	482	109	22.6
Personal Service	959	216	22.5
Communications Center Operations	1,493	335	22.4
Construction	1,675	364	21.7
Lithography	88	19	21.6
Combat Engineering	4,042	861	21.3
Fabric, Leather, and Rubber	80	17	21.3
Administration	6,006	1,276	21.3
Accounting, Finance and Disbursing	1,028	217	21.1
Armor and Amphibious	2,654	558	21.0
Utilities	1,670	350	21.0
Artillery/Gunnery, Rockets, and Missiles	4,174	861	20.6
Infantry	34,671	7,041	20.3
Other Functional Support	8,133	1,618	19.9
Radio and Radio Code	6,975	1,355	19.4
Armament and Munitions	4,115	787	19.1
Wire Communications	2,064	394	19.1
Automotive	6,722	1,267	18.9
Law Enforcement	3,491	568	16.3
Industrial Gas and Fuel Production	136	22	16.2
Forward Area Equipment Support	693	112	16.2
Weather	284	44	15.5
Missile Guidance, Control and Checkout	1,362	211	15.5
Technical Specialists, N.E.C.	1,353	209	15.5
Seamanship	54	8	14.8
Musicians	589	86	14.6
Other Electronic Equipment	342	46	13.5
Radar and Air Traffic Control	949	123	13.0
Information and Education	220	28	12.7
Photography	209	26	12.4

(continued)

**Appendix II**  
**Attrition Rates by Occupation**

<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Number of enlistees entering in fiscal years 1989-93</b>	<b>Number who separated early</b>	<b>Attrition rate (percent)</b>
Aircraft and Aircraft Related	6,523	779	11.9
Radio/Radar	4,890	567	11.6
Teletype and Cryptographic Equipment	295	34	11.5
Data Processing	1,226	133	10.9
Signal Intelligence/Electronic Warfare	1,214	130	10.7
Precision Equipment	346	36	10.4
Medical Care	40	4	10.0
Mapping, Surveying, Drafting, and Illustrating	305	30	9.8
Combat Operations Control	55	5	9.1
Intelligence	550	43	7.8
ADP Computers	257	20	7.8
Air Crew	727	36	5.0

# Comments From the Department of Defense



FORCE MANAGEMENT  
POLICY

ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE  
4000 DEFENSE PENTAGON  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301-4000



AUG 25 1998

Mr. Mark E. Gebicke  
Director, Military Operations and Capabilities Issues  
National Security and International Affairs Division  
U.S. General Accounting Office  
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Gebicke:

This is the Department of Defense (DoD) response to the General Accounting Office (GAO) draft report, "MILITARY ATTRITION: Better Data, Coupled with Policy Changes, Could Help the Services Reduce Early Separations," dated July 22, 1998 (GAO Code 703220/OSD Case 1658). The DoD concurs with the report findings and recommendations.

Attrition has been and remains a complex issue. It is clear that the Military Services cannot, and should not, keep every individual who enlists. Over the years, DoD and the Services have developed and refined policies to address attrition issues and to distinguish among those individuals who can be motivated to serve their term, those who fail to adapt or develop medical problems, and those who experience hardship (e.g., family circumstances).

While DoD concurs with the recommendations, the report's focus on the 1993 cohort is unfortunate since individuals in this cohort enlisted at the peak of military downsizing. Attrition rates at that time may, therefore, be somewhat inflated. Additional technical comments have been provided directly to the GAO staff for incorporation into the report. Our specific responses to the recommendations are enclosed. The Department appreciates the opportunity to comment on the draft report.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Francis M. Rush, Jr.".

Francis M. Rush, Jr.  
Acting Assistant Secretary

Enclosure:  
As stated



See p. 60.

GAO DRAFT REPORT – DATED JULY 22, 1998  
GAO CODE 703220/OSD CASE 1658

“MILITARY ATTRITION: BETTER DATA, COUPLED WITH POLICY CHANGES,  
COULD HELP THE SERVICES REDUCE EARLY SEPARATIONS”

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE COMMENTS TO THE RECOMMENDATIONS

**RECOMMENDATION 1:** To capture more accurately the numbers of enlisted personnel separated before the end of their first terms, the GAO recommended that the Secretary of Defense direct the Service Secretaries to include as a separate category the numbers of first-term personnel released more than 90 days before the end of their contract terms when they report first-term attrition rates. (p. 14, p. 93/GAO Draft Report)

Now on pp. 9 and 59.

**DOD RESPONSE:** Concur.

DoD concurs with what we believe to be the intent of the recommendation. The 90-day release option exists to preclude the cost, not to mention inconvenience, of transferring Service members to a new duty position just as they are about to complete their term of service and be discharged. In some cases, it may be reasonable to exercise leniency with the 90-day term (e.g., for someone just outside of 90 days). Such discharges cannot logically be considered similar to other types of adverse attrition. However, we agree with GAO that this policy should not be abused; reason(s) for separation should be accurately documented. Further, while DoD tracks attrition in terms of when it occurs (e.g., number of months after accession), on an individual basis we do not necessarily know the contracted term of service. Therefore, DoD will direct the Services to review their 90-day release policies and the exceptions granted to those policies.

See pp. 9 and 60.

**RECOMMENDATION 2:** In order to provide more information on what factors are related to first-term attrition, the GAO recommended that the Secretary of Defense direct the Service Secretaries to use existing quality-of-life surveys or create new ones to (1) collect information on the factors contributing to first-term enlistees' separation and (2) identify quality-of-life initiatives aimed at the retention of first-term personnel. (p. 14, p. 93/GAO Draft Report)

Now on pp. 9 and 59.

**DOD RESPONSE:** Concur.

DoD will direct the Services to collect information on factors contributing to first-term enlistees' separation and use that information to identify quality-of-life issues that could be addressed to reduce attrition. We will ask the Services to prepare a report on their research findings; a plan of action and milestones will be coordinated with the Services.

See pp. 9 and 60.

**RECOMMENDATION 3:** To retain as many first-term enlistees as possible, the GAO recommended that the Secretary of Defense direct the Service Secretaries to take the following actions:

- Continually emphasize to all commissioned and noncommissioned officers the costliness of first-term attrition, the difficulty of acquiring new enlistees to replace early losses, and the importance of providing positive leadership in targeting first-term enlistees who could be retained.
- (1) Collect more complete data on specific groups of enlistees whom the Services wish to target for retention and (2) issue guidance and formal policy changes to local commanders indicating what actions can be taken to retain these targeted groups through more counseling, optional testing, further job choices, or remedial training. Possibilities for targeting include enlistees being separated for minor disciplinary infractions, failure to pass physical training tests and career development tests, one-time drug use, and pregnancy.
- Reassess the appropriateness of providing favorable types of discharges to enlistees whose behavior or performance led to their early separation and ensure that proper incentives exist to encourage enlistees to complete their first terms. (p. 15, pp. 93-94/GAO Draft Report)

Now on pp. 9 and 59.

**DOD RESPONSE:** Concur.

DoD agrees that the cost of excessive attrition should be kept in mind. All levels of command have a responsibility to ensure that only those individuals who should not be kept in service are discharged before their term of obligation is completed. DoD will direct the Services to continually emphasize the cost of first-term attrition, impact on recruiting, and importance of positive leadership. DoD also will direct the Services to collect data on specific types of attrition that they may consider targeting for remedial attention. Guidance and formal policy changes will be issued to local commanders as needed to ensure appropriate actions. In addition, DoD will ask the Services to reassess the appropriateness of providing favorable types of discharges to enlistees whose behavior or performance led to their early separation and ensure that proper incentives exist to encourage enlistees to complete their first terms. DoD will require the Services to submit a report by October 1999 which documents their initiatives regarding this recommendation.

See pp. 9, 10, and 60.

# Major Contributors to This Report

---

**National Security and  
International Affairs  
Division, Washington,  
D.C.**

Carol Schuster  
William Beusse  
Beverly Schladt  
James Driggins  
Frank Bowen  
Julia Kennon  
Charles Perdue  
Nancy Ragsdale

---

## Ordering Information

The first copy of each GAO report and testimony is free. Additional copies are \$2 each. Orders should be sent to the following address, accompanied by a check or money order made out to the Superintendent of Documents, when necessary. VISA and MasterCard credit cards are accepted, also. Orders for 100 or more copies to be mailed to a single address are discounted 25 percent.

### Orders by mail:

U.S. General Accounting Office  
P.O. Box 37050  
Washington, DC 20013

### or visit:

Room 1100  
700 4th St. NW (corner of 4th and G Sts. NW)  
U.S. General Accounting Office  
Washington, DC

Orders may also be placed by calling (202) 512-6000 or by using fax number (202) 512-6061, or TDD (202) 512-2537.

Each day, GAO issues a list of newly available reports and testimony. To receive facsimile copies of the daily list or any list from the past 30 days, please call (202) 512-6000 using a touchtone phone. A recorded menu will provide information on how to obtain these lists.

For information on how to access GAO reports on the INTERNET, send an e-mail message with "info" in the body to:

[info@www.gao.gov](mailto:info@www.gao.gov)

or visit GAO's World Wide Web Home Page at:

<http://www.gao.gov>

---

**United States  
General Accounting Office  
Washington, D.C. 20548-0001**

**Bulk Rate  
Postage & Fees Paid  
GAO  
Permit No. G100**

**Official Business  
Penalty for Private Use \$300**

**Address Correction Requested**

---

