

# Where Have All the Future Veterans Gone?

*Word to the Nation: Guard zealously your right to serve in the Armed Forces, for without them, there will be no other rights to guard.*

John F. Kennedy<sup>1</sup>



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The title of this Veterans Day editorial is a paraphrase of the legendary folk artist Pete Seeger's protest song popularized during the Vietnam War. On January 27, 1973, in the wake of the widespread antiwar movement, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird announced an end to the dreaded draft.<sup>2</sup>

For nearly 50 years, the all-volunteer military was celebrated as an outstanding achievement that professionalized the armed services and arguably made the US military among the most highly trained and effective fighting forces in the world. That was until an ongoing recruitment crisis threatened to write a different and far more disturbing conclusion to what the government had heralded as a "success story."<sup>3</sup>

The recruiting crisis is a complicated problem with many facets that have received increasing attention from journalists, the media, experts, think tanks, and the government. Given this complexity, this will be a 2-part editorial: This column examines the scope of the crisis and the putative causes of the problem with recruiting Americans to serve in uniform. The next column will examine the potential impact of the shortage of service members on federal health care practice.

## THE RECRUITING CRISIS

Over the past several years, nearly every branch of the armed forces has struggled with recruitment, especially the Army. In April of this year, the US Department of Defense (DoD) reported that the Army, Navy, and Air Force would all fail to meet recruitment goals; only the Marines and Space Forces were expected to reach their targets.<sup>4</sup> At the end of its fiscal year (October 1), the Army acknowledged that its 55,000 recruits were 10,000 fewer soldiers than it had aimed to enlist.<sup>5</sup> But this was still more people joining the ranks than in 2022 when the Army was 15,000 recruits below the mark.<sup>6</sup>

## Challenging Trends

There are many putative causes and proposed solutions for the recruitment crisis. Among the most serious is a marked drop in the American public's confidence in the military. A June 2023 Gallup poll found that only 60% of citizens expressed "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in the military. This was the nadir of a 5-year decline that this year reached the lowest point since 1997/1998.<sup>7</sup> For many Americans in and out of uniform, the ignoble end to the long war in Afghanistan leaving behind friends and allies contrary to the military ethos is cited as a significant contributor to both the loss of confidence in the military and the recruiting crisis.<sup>8</sup>

These cultural developments reinforce each other. Now, many veterans do not want their relatives and friends to follow them into the armed services. A 2021 survey by the Military Family Advisory Network found that slightly more than 60% of veterans and active-duty service members would recommend a military career to a potential recruit. This was down from 75% in 2019.<sup>9</sup> Veterans cite a variety of reasons for discouraging their fellow citizens from serving, including low pay compared with civilian employment, especially in a labor-hungry job market; and the military failure to fulfill health care promises, housing, and other social services, especially for the growing number experiencing mental health disorders related to their service.<sup>10</sup>

Two facts about recruitment heighten the negative impact of some veterans' change of attitude toward joining the services. First, since the end of the draft, military life in the US has become a family tradition. Published in 2011, a *Pew Research Center* study found that even then, a decreasing number of Americans had a family connection to the military. More respondents aged  $\geq 50$  years had a parent, child, spouse, or sibling who had served compared with those aged 30 to 49 years and

those aged 18 to 29 (77%, 57%, and 33%, respectively).<sup>11</sup> Second, since the end of the draft, far fewer Americans have had military experience. Only 1% of the nation is currently in military service, and the veteran population is steadily declining. In 1980, 18% of adult Americans were veterans; 20 years later, that number is only 7%.<sup>12</sup> This makes it less likely that a high school or college student will have a personal or even a passing relationship with a teacher, coach, or other mentoring adult who is or has been a military member. This demographic discrepancy has generated what sociologists call the military-civilian gap.<sup>10</sup> That division has been manipulated in the increasingly vehement culture wars and generational struggles that are splitting the country.<sup>12</sup>

This relatively recent sociological trend is reflected in a growing lack of interest among many young Americans in armed forces service. A DoD survey of participants aged 16 to 24 years regarding their intention to serve in the military found that 89% were probably not going to pursue a career in uniform. More than 65% of respondents indicated that the possibility of physical injury, death, or psychological trauma was the primary deterrent for considering enlisting.<sup>13</sup> The latter barrier is directly related to our work as practitioners caring for service members and veterans, and through our compassion and competence, we may help bridge the widening divide between the military and civilian spheres. These numbers speak to the unwilling; there is also a significant group of Americans who want to serve yet are unable to due to their history, diagnoses, or condition.<sup>14</sup> Their motivation to be military members in the face of the recruitment challenges highlighted here present federal practitioners with ethical questions that will be the subject of the next column.

### Armed Forces and Veterans Day

This column's epigraph is from President John F. Kennedy, a decorated World War II Navy combat veteran who decreed Armed Forces Day an official holiday a decade before conscription ended.<sup>1</sup> The commemoration was to thank and honor all individuals currently serving in the military for their patriotism and sacrifice.

President Kennedy's Word to the Nation could not be timelier on Veterans Day 2023. The data reviewed here raise profound questions as to where tomorrow's service members and the veterans of the future will come from, and how we will persuade them that though there are real risks to military service, the rewards are both tangible and transcendent.

### Disclaimer

The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of *Federal Practitioner*, Frontline Medical Communications Inc., the US Government, or any of its agencies.

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