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## Special Commentary: Recruiting in a Post-COVID-19 World

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May 11, 2020 | COL Matt Lawrence

The COVID-19 pandemic is going to change military recruiting. Recently, the Army and its sister forces have been forced to [recruit virtually](#) and have slowed processing through [basic training](#). The Army has been vague about its [recruiting goals](#), instead focusing on end strength, so it will not have to deal with the fanfare of [missing its mission as it did in 2018](#). But the virus and its effects will actually help recruiting in the future. There was a storm gathering for recruiters, as the number of target youth would decrease in the years 2026-2031—a result of a decreased birth rate through the 2008 financial crisis and its fallout. Competition was going to be fierce with businesses and higher education.

The virus changed everything.

### THE PROBLEM

The 2008 financial crisis caused a [decline in birth rates](#) that will manifest itself with a reduced number of military-age young adults persisting from 2026 through 2031. Births have [continued to decline](#) steadily since 2008, posting a slight gain only in 2014. Approximately 300,000 fewer babies are born today each year as compared to a decade ago—nearly an 8 percent drop. The decline in high school matriculation from 2025 through 2028 is the most significant, where [projections](#) by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education predict over 250,000 fewer graduates in that three-year period. The number of graduates somewhat stabilizes after that point.

Immigration has the potential to mute the effects of this decline (enlisted soldiers do not need to be citizens), but immigration has been curtailed significantly in the past several years. In 2019, the United States granted [permanent residence](#) to 577,000 people, a hefty decline from two years earlier when [1.13 million permanent statuses](#) were issued. The COVID-19 pandemic then slowed immigration to a trickle. The US Citizenship and Immigration Services have [reduced their services](#) to emergencies only from March through June to combat the virus. The president also weighed in, [halting all immigration](#) for sixty days starting in April.

The result is a competition for the resource of talent. There will be less youth to replace retiring baby boomers and to occupy seats in colleges and universities. The military, and specifically the Army, must also compete for the same pool of recruits.

## **HIGHER EDUCATION IN CRISIS**

The effects of these trends were a significant worry for long-term planners in recruiting and especially for higher education. Colleges across the country are already largely [financially stressed](#) and dependent on full freshmen enrollment to maintain debt payments and remain operating. Colleges, which had already been under attack for the [value of education](#), will be put to extreme tests because of COVID-19. A [recent survey](#) found that 11 percent of graduating high school seniors were altering their college plans due to effects of the pandemic, either for health concerns or personal changes in financial situation. Regardless of the reason, such a decline is enough to put many financially strapped schools out of business. Public institutions are not exempt from these stresses, as states themselves will look to regain control of their finances and close underperforming schools.

## **ELIGIBILITY AND PROPENSITY WILL HOLD STEADY**

While there has been a seemingly endless stream of [reporters](#), [pundits](#), and [generals](#) lamenting the decline of America's youth both in their eligibility for service and their likelihood of joining, these fears are largely overblown. Though the percentage of youth ineligible to serve is high, it is still [an improvement](#) over the decade prior, and long-term trends for most disqualifying factors are either level or improving. It is unclear if the COVID-19 pandemic will have a positive or negative effect on any of these qualities. As for youth's likelihood of joining, despite the claims of declining interest in service, the [long-term trends since 2009](#) show propensity to be steady.

There will be no reason that propensity will change, either. The Army has been an integral part of the recovery solution, mobilizing more than [forty-five thousand National Guard troops](#), over three thousand Army Reserve soldiers, and assisting cities with temporary hospitals courtesy of the [US Army Corps of Engineers](#). Respect for the military will remain constant throughout the next several years as long as it retains its apolitical stance in national matters.

## **ALL ABOUT THE BENJAMINS—ECONOMY**

No one can be completely sure what the future of the American economy will be, but the immense amounts of [debt](#) the United States and [the world](#) have taken on to keep their economies afloat will require higher taxes and reductions in spending—and possibly a major reshuffling of national priorities. As a result, any economic recovery from coronavirus will take time. Until there is a vaccine that is widely available, the changes people have adopted in their daily lives are likely to mute any recovery. Adding to the issue is a [corporate debt crisis](#) where

companies crippled by the effects of the pandemic cannot make their bond payments. Already, corporations in financial turmoil have [filed for bankruptcy](#) and will eliminate jobs—and this is just the beginning.

All combined, this equates to a good number of the [thirty million already lost jobs](#) becoming permanent losses. While many hope for a quick recovery, the financial stresses on both governmental revenues and spending will likely drag on for several years. Many small businesses, which often rely on steady cash flow to operate, will just never reopen. Banks were already [unwilling to lend](#) to small businesses to help them weather the crisis and will be very careful in lending money to startups for years to come.

## **ALL ABOUT THE BENJAMINS—ARMY**

The Army will [likely face extreme budget cuts](#) because of government financial constraints. This may manifest itself in a sequestration-type pullback of funding, or a major restructuring if the United States reevaluates its world commitments and national security posture. The [proposed cuts](#) to Army active end strength under the Obama administration may look minor if the latter scenario were to occur. Regardless, since the Army's [personnel footprint and costs](#) are the largest of all the services, sharp reductions in end strength of all three components should be expected. Budgetary pressures are likely to ensure those reductions are enduring and not subject to the political cycle as they normally are.

Army budget line items used in the recruiting process will also face scrutiny and sharp cuts. The Army's use of enlistment bonuses, traditionally the [most generous](#) of the armed forces, will likely be slashed significantly. The Army's marketing budget, which had grown significantly, will be slashed as well, forcing the [new Army Marketing Enterprise Office](#) to reevaluate its strategy and lines of effort. Other popular programs such as tuition assistance and student loan repayment will face cuts and likely receive program limits, effectively negating them as a benefit promise recruiters can use. Also at risk are the National Guard [state tuition assistance](#) programs, which will be at risk for cuts or caps as states look to balance their budgets to recover financially.

## **EFFECTS ON RECRUITING**

The sharp cuts in personnel will enable future Army recruiting and end strength success. The Army has shown that its [yearly capacity for recruits](#) is somewhere around sixty-eight thousand. Thanks to COVID-19, the population dip will not be the threat it was expected to be. Now, the next ten years likely present a far more favorable competitive environment for Army recruiting as higher education flounders and the private sector slowly recovers. While the depth of any manpower cuts will ultimately dictate how much lower yearly recruiting targets can go, recruiting requirements may dip lower than its [2014 nadir](#) of fifty-seven thousand recruits during the drawdown from the Iraq War surge.

The Army's challenge has not been getting enough people to join as conventional wisdom contends. The challenge was getting the right people to join. The Army requires smarter-than-average recruits to operate its complex equipment and to understand its operating concepts. There will be some economic desperation for some of the US population, but that is [not a primary reason](#) for joining the military today and will not be in the next ten years. A poor economy and a languid recovery, however, will push many "[fence-sitters](#)" who may have not joined in better times to investigate service more thoroughly and consider the opportunities it presents.

A smaller military will reduce competition between the services for recruits, and will drive some who might have served in other forces to consider Army service as an alternative. As the Army declines in size, it will also [enable the reserve components](#) to keep their troop levels high with more experienced soldiers leaving the active force, alleviating the pressure on them to maintain [historically high retention rates](#).

## **BUT ROTC WILL BE HURT**

The potential loser here will be the Army's officer corps. While West Point will remain largely unaffected, it is not the top producer of officers. The Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) is the largest source of commissioning for the Army. The Army's third source for officers, Officer Candidate School, will also contract, largely due to the overall troop reductions and the contraction of college benefits. The ROTC commissioning mission will undoubtedly be cut, and the program's ability to meet even those targets remains in question because of a combination of factors.

Fewer colleges and college students will mean a smaller pool of ROTC applicants. In addition, Generation Z already has serious doubts about the value of a four-year degree. This has given life to the trend toward [career technical education](#), which diverts students from colleges to career-building, non-degree programs. Expect career technical education programs will grow in the aftermath of the pandemic as smart but cash-strapped youth look to enter the workforce faster than the traditional college model allows. ROTC scholarships will be slashed dramatically along with the rest of the Army's educational benefits, forcing the Army to rely evermore on its simultaneous membership and Green to Gold programs. Cadet Command will be forced to shrink, reducing its cadre at some existing programs (which are already at critically low levels) and closing some of its lower performing ones—a politically difficult feat in the past.

Because ROTC has a four-year generation cycle (or at best two years with interested sophomores), the program will overproduce for the next couple of years as the Army slashes end strength quicker than Cadet Command can respond. The worst-case scenario would be a relatively quick economic recovery and political changes that attempt to regrow the Army. Smaller freshman classes in 2023-2026 would be difficult to expand to meet higher commissioning demands for 2027-2030 with all of the aforementioned factors.

## CONCLUSION

The future will require the Army to operate efficiently in its marketing and recruiting efforts to get the right people in its ranks, regardless of the future size of the force. The COVID-19 pandemic and its numerous effects on the economy may alleviate the challenge posed by a declining target population, but many challenges remain. The Army should continue to be creative with its policies to attract Gen Z, and consider non-traditional terms of service such as dual status enlistments that enable movement between the active and reserve components. The Army should revisit its service policies on special recruiting populations such as medical and cyber professionals to ensure that it gets the needed talent without placing unnecessary barriers to service in their path. And finally, the Army should also carefully consider what level of educational benefits it needs to attract the right people and ensure that those are preserved instead of harvested for cheap financial savings.

The future will be tough for the entire country. Perhaps, finally, the pandemic will be the catalyst for America to discuss what government it truly needs and what costs it is willing to bear for it. The Army will continue to be the centerpiece of our homeland security and our global influence, and will need to work hard to ensure it attracts the right people to remain up to the task.

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