

CLEARINGHOUSE FOR MILITARY FAMILY READINESS

Service Member Reenlistment: Rapid Literature Review

Clearinghouse Technical Assistance Team

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Executive Summary

This report was developed in response to a request for information on Service member (SM) reenlistment and retention trends. In an effort to observe reenlistment and retention data over a large timeframe (i.e., the past 30 years) and capture the impact of various military operations on reenlistment and retention, the Technical Assistance team reviewed research published from 1993 to 2022.

There are numerous reasons why SMs decide to continue serving in the military. Reenlistment and retention decisions may be influenced by several factors such as Service branch, time served, family well-being, and incentives for continued service. This report offers a broad overview of the factors that affect SMs' retention and reenlistment. Reasons why SMs choose to remain in the military fall under two main categories: material motivation (e.g., salary offered, education benefits) and non-material motivation (e.g., sense of pride in serving).

Introduction

Reenlistment is defined as “voluntary enrollment after the initial enlistment or induction” (U.S. Department of the Army, 2021, p. 61). Retention refers to the rate at which reenlistment occurs. Understanding individual reasons for reenlistment is important because it helps military leadership identify the incentive structures that impact reenlistment and use these structures to develop strategies to maintain readiness - whether this occurs by increasing or decreasing the rate of reenlistment (i.e., retention).

To better understand the factors that influence reenlistment and retention, the Technical Assistance (TA) team at the Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State (Clearinghouse) conducted a brief, rapid literature review on Service member (SM) reenlistment and retention. Research that examines this topic was identified by searching peer-reviewed journal articles and grey literature, and an emphasis was placed on research published between 1993 and 2022. Search queries included various combinations of the following terms: military, reenlistment, retention, and enlistment.

This rapid review provides the following:

- Background information on reenlistment including reasons for reenlistment,
- Background information on retention and trends among Service branches,
- Brief snapshot of current retention trends, and
- RAND resource repository for further information on military personnel retention.

Note, this rapid review provides a preliminary examination of the research and is not intended to serve as a comprehensive review of the literature. Rather, the review is intended to help stakeholders make data-driven decisions about next steps.

Background

The option to reenlist is an important life decision that many SMs must consider after their initial enlistment is over. SMs likely consider a variety of factors when deciding whether or not to reenlist. These factors include variables that can be placed into two categories: material and non-material. Material motivations refer to tangible benefits such as compensation, educational benefits, or training that the military will provide the SM in exchange for military service. Non-material reasons to reenlist include considerations such as ideals and beliefs and family support for continued service. As reenlistment is a decision that has implications for the span of an individual's and a family's life, multiple variables inevitably influence an SM's choices.

Given that each branch of the military provides unique compensations, bonuses, benefits, and experiences, the decision to reenlist varies for SMs across the different branches. Similarly, reenlistment-related practices and incentives look different across Service branches as they have diverse needs to fill. Increases or decreases in recruiting efforts are partly decided by branch end strength for the fiscal year. End strength refers to the number of SMs (i.e., force number) Congress has authorized for a specific Service branch in a specific fiscal year. For example, in fiscal year 2019, all Service branches increased their end strength and retention goals except for the Marine Corps. In 2020, the Marine Corps initiated existing plans to decrease end strength (Calkins & Asch, 2022).

The Congressional Research Service (2021) recommends that Congress ask the following three questions to examine the appropriateness of retention goals prior to authorization:

- Were the retention goals properly set (e.g., reasonable)?
- Is military compensation aligned with compensation within the civilian workforce?
- Is job satisfaction trending downward?

Considering that retention “refers to the rate at which military personnel voluntarily choose to stay in the military after their obligated term of service has ended” (Congressional Research Service, 2021, p.1), military retention rates may have adverse impacts on the Service branches when they are too high or too low. When end strength is lower than the congressionally established threshold, it may indicate that SMs are separating at a higher than anticipated rate. When these increased separations occur, the Service branches assume that some departures include experienced SMs and thus anticipate a reduced pool of leadership personnel (Congressional Research Service, 2021). When end strength increases beyond the desired rate of attrition, promotions become more difficult as high-level leadership and management roles remain filled because turnover decreases (Congressional Research Service, 2021).

In 2011, the Military Leadership Diversity Commission released a report that listed the top reasons for separation (Congressional Research Service, 2021). Table 1 describes the reasons for separation from service for enlisted SMs and officers. Note, the reasons an SM considers separation may be outweighed by other key factors (e.g., an SM who

attributes “low job satisfaction” as their reason for considering separation may reenlist because of education benefits provided, rather than any change in his or her job satisfaction). In other words, SMs may separate or reenlist for multiple reasons, and those combined reasons may outweigh their feelings of dissatisfaction. In addition, not all SMs have the option to reenlist as any discharge other than honorable can disqualify an SM from future service.

Table 1
Self-Reported Reasons for Separation from Service by Enlisted Service Members and Officers

<i>Enlisted</i>	<i>Officer</i>
Poor promotion or advancement opportunities	Poor promotion or advancement opportunities including failure to be promoted
Low job satisfaction	Low job satisfaction
Desire to settle in a particular location	Desire to settle in a particular location
Low pay and allowances	Desire to start a second career before becoming too old
Desire to continue education	Not receiving desirable or appropriate assignments

Adapted from Military Leadership Diversity Commission, 2011

Congress is acutely aware of retention rates and begins to take note when a Service branch begins to miss goals for a retention zone by 10% or more, and their interest increases if these targets are missed in consecutive years (Congressional Research Service, 2021). In addition, to retain SMs, targeted goals may also be set for specific skill sets (e.g., network security, healthcare). In 2020, one study by the Government Accountability Office reviewed female SM retention and found that female SMs were 28% more likely to separate than their male counterparts (Farrell, 2020). Note, this study did not explore the reasons for separation.

There is some work to suggest that female SMs may have different motivations for separating. In Farrell’s (2020) review of existing literature, she notes that the loss of family time due to military responsibilities was listed more often as a separation consideration from female SMs when compared to their male cohorts. Some other reasons for higher rates of female separation include the following (Farrell, 2020):

- Dissatisfaction with the organizational culture,
- Lack of female mentors and role models in leadership positions,
- Experiences of sexism (e.g., the existence of an “old boy’s network,” feeling like they have to work harder to prove themselves, feeling like they were not treated equally based on gender, being a victim of sexual assault and how the sexual assault was handled).

The military depends on reenlistment to fill positions that require specific skill sets. The military has few options when hiring individuals, who have specialized training, outside of

its ranks (Daniels, 2021). In other words, the military must develop specific skill sets in personnel and retain those individuals as much as possible because hiring skilled personnel outside of the military is not conducive to some personnel assignments. One example of this is Air Force pilot attrition. The Air Force, in the past, has had a challenging time retaining senior pilots because they separate for civilian piloting jobs (Daniels, 2021). In 2016, Air Force Chief of Staff General David Goldfein publicly noted that the Air Force was 1,500 pilots short of desired end strength for that role (Daniels, 2021). In 2021, Daniels (2021) indicated the situation had worsened, and the pilot deficit had increased to 2,100. By understanding the SMs motivations for reenlistment, the Service branches could use that information and engage those who may be in the separation decision-making process.

Further research is required to understand the motivations for reenlistment or separation for specific demographics as motivations for reenlistment may differ among various demographics (e.g., gender, race) (Braun et al., 2015). SMs can have material and non-material motivators for reenlistment, and these factors are key to understanding the impact of retention strategies.

Material Reasons for Reenlistment

Common material reasons for Military Service reenlistment may include the following:

- Pay,
- Education benefits, and
- Deployment circumstances.

Payment

The difference between military and civilian pay is a key motivator for SMs as they consider whether they will reenlist in the military (Daula & Moffitt, 1995; Warner, 2012). In fact, Daula and Moffitt (1995) found that SMs were more likely to reenlist when the difference in salaries between the military and civilian sector was small. In addition, when comparing the pay difference between the civilian sectors and the military, SMs considered retirement benefits over many other factors (Daula & Moffitt, 1995). However, one must consider the changes that have occurred in compensation methods since these data were collected. For example, the retirement system in the military has undergone dramatic changes since these results were reported.

In addition to salary, the military has frequently offered various pay incentives, and these can impact reenlistment rates. For example, a monetary incentive used by the military is the Selective Reenlistment Bonus (SRB). SRBs are bonuses that are offered to SMs to increase reenlistment. SRBs have been shown to be an effective reenlistment incentive (Warner, 2012). From 2003 to 2008, the SRB budget increased from \$625 million to \$1.4 billion (Asch et al., 2010). This budget increase contributed to the Service branches continuing to meet their reenlistment goals during a time when the Military Services were attempting to rapidly expand (Asch et al., 2010).

Pay incentives can also be used to engage in the reduction of force efforts. For example, during military drawdowns in the 1990s (i.e., Fiscal Year 1990 to Fiscal Year 1998), the military offered Voluntary Separation Incentives (VSI) in an effort to reduce the size of the Service branches without compromising readiness. VSI refers to incentives (e.g., bonuses) that are given to SMs who agree to separate from service. The use of VSIs likely led to decreased reenlistment rates as SMs compared military pay grades with salaries within the civilian sector (Daula & Moffitt, 1995), including VSIs, and found the civilian pay levels to be higher.

For some who reenlist, Military Service may be seen as a stable income during challenging economic times. The Service branches, in general, see increases in recruitment and retention in years when the United States experiences higher unemployment rates (Calkins & Asch, 2022). In Warner's (2012) review of previous studies, he estimates that for every percentage point that civilian unemployment increases military reenlistment numbers increase by .5%. Further study that examines the current impact of economic trends on reenlistment and retention is needed.

Education Benefits

Educational benefits serve as a critical incentive for U.S. military recruitment (Warner, 2012). However, individuals who enlist in the military may often do so primarily for the educational benefits and may have no intention of serving beyond their initial contract date (Warner, 2012). Although educational incentives promote recruitment efforts, they may decrease reenlistment rates among SMs. Price and Kim (1993) demonstrated that SMs, who planned to attain higher education after their initial service was complete, were more likely to separate from the military. This same study also found that intent to stay in the military increased until personnel reached 10 years of service; at that time, contemplation of separation increased. However, this study was limited, and these results cannot be generalized. Warner (2012) suggests that one way to increase retention through education benefits is to allow SMs, who continue service for at least 10 years, to be able to transfer their military benefits to dependents.

Impact of Deployment

Deployment circumstances (e.g., length of deployment, bonus incentives for deployment) may impact reenlistment. In an analysis conducted by Hosek and Martorell (2009), SMs were less likely to reenlist when they had been deployed for 12 months or longer at any point within the 3 years of their reenlistment date compared to SMs who were not deployed. SMs who were deployed for less than 12 months in the same 3-year period were more likely than non-deployed SMs to reenlist (Hosek & Martorell, 2009). Thus, Hosek and Martorell (2009) made the policy recommendation that deployments should be limited to less than 12 months over a span of 36 months. Furthermore, pay bonuses increased reenlistment rates of those who have been deployed to hostile areas (Hosek & Martorell, 2009).

Non-Material Reasons for Reenlistment

Non-material reasons may include the following:

- Ideals
- Family

Ideals

Some SMs are drawn to serve and continue to serve due to feelings of duty. Moore (2002) published a study that investigated the tendency of junior enlisted personnel to reenlist and found that “pride in service” was the most powerful motivator regarding reenlistment from SMs across all Service branches. Satisfaction with pay and other benefits were not included in the top predictors for continued service in this study (Moore, 2002). Based on the findings from Moore (2002), one may find it useful to investigate to what extent personal values and beliefs influence reenlistment decision making compared to financial reasons for reenlistment. Although there are volunteers who feel a strong intrinsic calling to military service, this motivator, alone, may not be enough of an incentive for many potential enlistments and reenlistments.

Family

One of the questions that this review sought to answer was “what impact, if any, does an SMs perception of others’ separation experience (e.g., family, friends) impact their reenlistment decision making?” No research was identified on the impact of others’ separation experiences on reenlistment trends. Further study is necessary to understand how other SMs’ transition satisfaction impact SMs’ choices to separate or reenlist.

What is known about the impact of family on the decision to separate or reenlist is that spouses and family members may have a substantial influence on SM retention (Burrell et al., 2003). Spouses who had positive connections to the military community tended to encourage SMs to continue to serve and reenlist (Burrell et al., 2003). Conversely, spouses who struggled to engage or connect with the military community were more likely to support their spouse’s military separation (Burrell et al., 2003). In addition, Robbert et al. (2022) found that married SMs with children were more likely to reenlist.

Resource for Further Information

For additional information on retention across Service branches, please see the RAND Military Personnel Retention website. This page hosts a variety of research, briefings, blogs and other types of media related to U.S. military retention. You can access this website here: <https://www.rand.org/topics/military-personnel-retention.html>

Summary

Staying in or leaving the military is an important life decision many SMs must make at some point. SMs must consider a variety of variables when deciding whether to reenlist or separate from the military. These motivations may involve material incentives such as pay or education benefits. The reasons for staying may also include non-material motivations such as ideals or family attitudes toward the military.

Based upon this rapid review of the research literature, no centralized analyses of trends or variables of impact on the topics of interest were identified. Future research efforts may include performing evaluations that could identify the current motivational variables that SMs consider when deciding whether to reenlistment. With the exclusion of the RAND webpage provided in the Resource section above, there is a lack of resource repositories that house information on the topics of interest.

Several gaps in research are evident and include addressing retention and reenlistment by demographic and Service branch and distinguishing between active duty service or Guard or Reserve forces. Research that targets these areas may reveal options for managing retention and reenlistment efforts among different communities. Further investigation regarding the motivations for separation may also prove helpful in understanding reenlistment and retention. Furthermore, the reenlistment topic domain may benefit from more critically examining the role the military plays in influencing an individual's decision to reenlist. For example, further research is needed to determine if retention strategies are equally as incentivizing across various demographics. Finally, a gap exists in understanding in what ways, if any, the availability and quality of support for SMs after service may impact enlistment.

Additional Assistance

The TA specialists at the Clearinghouse provide support to professionals as they examine and make informed decisions about which programs fit specific situations and are worth the investment. Whether connecting one with the resources and tools to conduct a needs assessment in a specific community, suggesting the best evidence-based program or practice for a certain situation, or developing an evaluation plan, the TA team of experts is a call or email away.

Please visit the Clearinghouse's website at www.militaryfamilies.psu.edu or call 1-877-382-9185 to speak with a TA specialist.

Suggested Citation

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