



Defense Primer: Active Component Enlisted Retention

Retention

The term *retention* refers to the rate at which military personnel voluntarily choose to stay in the military after their obligated term of service has ended (as determined by their enlistment contract). Imbalances in the retention rate can cause problems within the military personnel system. A common retention concern is that too few people will stay in, thereby creating a shortage of experienced leaders, decreasing military efficiency, and lowering job satisfaction. This was a particular concern from 2004 to 2009, as the stress of major combat deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan raised concerns about the willingness of military personnel to continue serving. The opposite concern may also occur at times, particularly during force drawdowns: that too many people will stay in, thereby decreasing promotion opportunities and possibly requiring involuntarily separations to prevent the organization from becoming “top heavy” with middle- and upper-level leaders or to comply with end-strength limitations. Each of these imbalances can also have a negative impact on recruiting by making the military a less-attractive career option.

Congressional Role

The Constitution provides Congress with broad powers over the Armed Forces, including the power “To raise and support Armies” and “To provide and maintain a Navy.” In the exercise of this authority, Congress has historically shown great interest in maintaining military retention rates sufficient to sustain a fully manned and capable military workforce. Through its oversight powers, Congress monitors the performance of the Executive Branch in managing the size and quality of the military workforce.

Congress influences retention rates in a variety of ways, including authorizing and funding

- overall compensation levels, particularly in light of their competitiveness with private-sector compensation;
- quality-of-life initiatives that enhance servicemember and family member satisfaction with a military career;
- retention programs that provide for dedicated career counselors; and
- retention incentives, such as reenlistment bonuses.

More broadly, congressionally established personnel end-strength levels can influence each armed service’s retention goals. For example, if Congress were to substantially increase the end-strength for an armed service, that service would generally require a greater number of new recruits, higher rates of retention among current servicemembers, or some combination of the two. Congress also establishes criteria that affect eligibility for continued service, such as

disability separation and retirement (Title 10, *U.S. Code*, Chapter 61) and punitive discharge for criminal activity (Title 10, *U.S. Code*, Chapter 45).

Retention Goals and Results

Table 1 lists active component enlisted retention goals and results for FY2019-FY2021. The data are broken out by armed service and *retention zones*, which are established by each armed service to reflect important phases in the military career lifecycle. For example, a soldier coming to the end of his or her first enlistment after serving for four years in the Army would be in the Army’s *Initial Term* retention zone; a similarly situated sailor would fall into the Navy’s *Zone A* retention zone. The armed services’ main retention zones listed in **Table 1** are defined as follows:

Army Retention Zones

- **Initial Term:** serving in first enlistment, regardless of length
- **Mid-career:** second or subsequent enlistment with less than 10 years of service
- **Career:** second or subsequent enlistment with 10 or more years of service

Navy Retention Zones

- **Zone A:** up to six years of service
- **Zone B:** 6 years of service to under 10 years of service
- **Zone C:** 10 years of service to under 14 years of service

Marine Corps Retention Zones

- **First term:** serving in first enlistment
- **Subsequent:** second or subsequent enlistment, with less than 18 years of service

Air Force Retention Zones

- **Zone A:** 17 months to under 6 years of service
- **Zone B:** 6 years of service to under 10 years of service
- **Zone C:** 10 years of service to under 14 years of service

Congressional interest in retention typically increases when an armed service fails to meet its goal for one or more retention zones by about 10% or more, and particularly if the shortfall continues over several years. Additionally, even if an armed service is meeting its goals by retention zones, Congress may nonetheless focus on retention

shortfalls within specific occupational specialties (for example, health care professions or special operations).

The perceived cause of any such shortfalls is often of interest to Congress as well. For example, was the shortfall related to congressionally directed end-strength increases,

which necessitated higher retention goals? Was it due to more attractive compensation packages in the private sector? Was it due to decreased job satisfaction? The perceived cause can affect interpretations of the shortfalls' significance and the options for remedying them.

Table I. Retention Goals and Results
Active Component Enlisted Personnel, FY2019-FY2021

Armed Service/ Retention Category	FY2019			FY2020			FY2021		
	Goal	Achieved	Percent of Goal	Goal	Achieved	Percent of Goal	Goal	Achieved	Percent of Goal
Army									
Initial	20,253	20,525	101%	21,990	22,924	104%	25,006	25,618	102%
Mid-Career	19,430	19,702	101%	18,240	19,174	105%	19,776	20,388	103%
Career	10,833	11,105	103%	9,990	10,924	109%	11,494	12,106	105%
Navy*									
Zone A	18,798	20,978	112%	19,250	17,969	93%	17,594	18,099	103%
Zone B	8,065	9,121	113%	11,570	9,315	81%	8,184	7,701	94%
Zone C	4,888	5,834	119%	6,318	5,701	90%	5,304	5,200	98%
Marine Corps*									
First	5,584	5,498	98%	5,412	5,491	101%	5,877	5,567	95%
Subsequent	6,209	6,124	99%	6,005	6,004	100%	5,835	5,853	100%
Air Force*									
Zone A	16,330	21,233	130%	16,590	20,717	125%	18,068	23,013	127%
Zone B	8,823	11,820	134%	9,003	10,463	116%	9,941	11,478	115%
Zone C	6,997	9,008	129%	7,218	8,484	118%	7,406	8,539	115%

Source: Department of Defense.

Note: *The Navy and Air Force also have a Zone D and Zone E, which are not displayed above. Navy Zone D is 14 to 20 years of service, and Zone E is more than 20 years of service. Air Force Zone D is 14 years to under 18 years of service and Zone E is 18 years to under 20 years of service. Starting in FY2020, the Marine Corps added an "Other" retention category which is not displayed above. It includes those who reenlist with more than 18 years of service, certain Marines who reenlist under a special program for high quality personnel, and short-term extensions of existing enlistment contracts into the next fiscal year. DOD is not yet reporting retention results for the newly established Space Force.

Relevant Statutes

Title 10 U.S. Code, Chapter 31
Title 10 U.S. Code, Section 115

Skills, Selective Reenlistment Bonuses, and Critical Skills Retention Bonuses for Active Members

Other Resources

DOD Instruction 1332.45, Retention Determinations for Non-Deployable Service Members
DOD Instruction 1308.3, DOD Physical Fitness and Body Fat Programs Procedures
DOD Instruction 1304.29, Administration of Enlistment Bonuses, Accession Bonuses for New Officers in Critical

Lawrence Kapp, Specialist in Military Manpower Policy

IF11274

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.