

U.S.

# The New York Times

## *As Economy Roars, Army Falls Thousands Short of Recruiting Goals*

By Dave Philipps

Sept. 21, 2018

COLORADO SPRINGS — The Army fell thousands of troops short of its recruiting goals this year, the first time it has done so since the height of the Iraq war 13 years ago.

The shortfall is due in part to a hot job market that has lured away many recruits at a time that President Trump and Congress seek to expand the military, and have raised the number the Army needs to meet.

The Army hoped to bring in about 76,500 new soldiers this year. But with the fiscal year ending this month, it is still 6,500 troops short, even after spending an extra \$200 million on bonuses and lowering standards to let in more troops with conduct or health issues.

On top of having to compete with a robust economy, with an unemployment rate below 4 percent, the Army must pick from what it says is a shrinking pool of eligible recruits. More than two-thirds of young adults do not qualify for military service because of poor physical fitness or other issues such as drug use, according to the Army.

“You have fewer people who can serve, they have more opportunities in the job market, that makes it very hard on the Army,” said Beth Asch, a senior economist at the RAND Corporation who studies military recruiting.

The shortfall will not leave the Army paralyzed, representing only about 1 percent of the force. But it is a sign of growing cultural and economic changes that, if not addressed, could hollow out the Army from within.

The Army has invested in more recruiters and advertising, Dr. Asch said, and sweetened the deal for prospective soldiers with bonuses and other benefits. It has also had to soften admissions. This year it gave hundreds more waivers for past drug use than it did a few years ago.

In a statement, the Army said the shortfall was evidence that it was not settling for lower-quality recruits, but was instead trying to “raise the quality of our recruits despite the tough recruiting environment.”

“As we look to 2019 and beyond, we have laid the foundation to improve recruiting for the Army while maintaining an emphasis on quality over quantity,” Lt. Col. Emanuel L. Ortiz said. “Our leaders remain confident we will achieve the Army Vision of growing the regular Army above 500,000 soldiers.”

For years, the military had been heading the other way. Mandatory budget cuts caused the Army to shed more than 100,000 troops from 2010 to 2016. The Army was not only recruiting fewer soldiers, but was forcing troops out. It was on course to shrink to 450,000 soldiers in 2017 when Mr. Trump did an about-face. Fulfilling a campaign promise to stop the drawdown, he signed a bill that expanded the Army to 476,000. This year it was supposed to grow to 483,500, but actual numbers remained flat.

The Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps met their recruiting goals for 2018, but the Army, which is by far the biggest branch of the military, had to recruit more than twice as many troops as other branches. Initially, the Army planned to recruit 80,000 soldiers in 2018, but lowered its goal to 76,500 in April because it was able to retain more soldiers already in the force. That still left a much larger-than-normal task for Army recruiters amid a roaring economy.

At an urgent care center in the suburbs of Denver on Friday, Josh Griffin, a high school senior, had just finished taking a drug test for a new job at a discount tire company down the road. He said that recruiters had talked to him in high school, and that the military sounded appealing at first: money for college, a steady job and a way to give back to his country.

But now he sees better options, he said, adding, “I don’t have any doubt in my mind about finding a job.”

The military's promise of college tuition and other benefits has less of a draw, said Sgt. First Class Michael T. Peppers, the commander of a strip mall recruiting station next to a Subway and a Tasty Tacos in Urbandale, Iowa.

"We're competing with other businesses offering the same things," he said, noting that even McDonald's has a program to help employees pay tuition.

The military also says it has to pick from young adults who are increasingly unqualified to serve because of mental health issues, criminal convictions or obesity.

"That's our biggest obstacle," Maj. Gen. Jeffrey Snow, who until recently was the head of Army recruiting, said in November. He said natural disasters that led to the closing of several recruiting stations, including in the reliably rich recruiting ground of Puerto Rico, also contributed to shortfalls.

The Army faced a similar predicament in 1999, during the dot-com boom. That year, according to a Government Accountability Office report, the Army fell short by about 6,000 recruits. It responded by doubling its recruiting budget, adding enlistment bonuses up to \$20,000, and allowing enlistees it would have turned away in the past, such as those who had no high school diploma, but still scored well on Army aptitude tests.

Similar measures are in effect today, Dr. Asch, the RAND economist, said. Troops who cannot pass a body-mass test may still get in on a strength test. Troops without a diploma are more likely to get a second chance if they do well on an Army aptitude test. And those with criminal convictions or other misconduct in their past can get waivers if they can show they have overcome past troubles.

Dr. Asch said the Army was still well within Defense Department benchmarks, and nowhere near the dismal levels reached in the years after the Vietnam War, when recruiting collapsed. In 1979, six of 10 Army divisions stationed in the United States were considered "not combat ready." In 1980, only half of recruits had graduated from high school (it is now 90 percent), and drug use, crime and unauthorized absences were so rampant that 40 percent of new recruits were expelled.

The Army's shortfall this year comes as it has sidelined more than 1,100 high-quality recruits, many with graduate degrees and top-tier physical fitness scores, because they are legal immigrants but lack green cards. These recruits were part of a special program called Military Accessions Vital to National Interests, or Mavni, but have been in limbo for years because they have not passed strict security vetting imposed after they enlisted. The Army is now trying to discharge them.

Jackson Barnett contributed reporting from Westminster, Colo., and Ann Klein from Urbandale, Iowa.

A version of this article appears in print on Sept. 22, 2018, on Page A16 of the New York edition with the headline: Army Misses Recruit Goal, Despite Lower Standards