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Recruiting Crisis: Analysis of Navy Recruiting Deficiencies in 2022 and Beyond

March 2023

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Prepared for the Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA 93943.

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ABSTRACT

Fiscal Year 2022 was described by senior military officials as one of the most difficult recruiting years since the end of conscription service in 1973. All services within the Department of Defense struggled to achieve or failed to meet assigned accession goals in Fiscal Year 2022 and officials predict that Fiscal Year 2023 will pose an even bigger challenge due to year over year accession goal increases and the depletion of future accessions from delayed entry pools. This thesis identifies systemic and emergent challenges specific to the United States Navy recruiting mission. Countless studies have identified challenges such as national unemployment rate and other economic factors, rising obesity and other medical trends in the American population, and war-time actions or military operations as contributors to recruiting difficulties. Using a qualitative analysis approach, I provide an in-depth description of the Navy recruiting structure, analyze past literature to identify factors causing recruiting challenges, and compile responses gathered from interviews with Navy Talent Acquisition Group leaders from across the enterprise. The findings indicate that manpower deficiencies, advertising shortcomings, the job market, recruiting transformation, high school access, the political environment, and low propensity to serve are all contributors to recruiting struggles. Future analysis of policies to counteract these external factors is highly recommended.



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I would like to thank my wife, Carrie, and my children, Henry and Matthew, for supporting me on this journey. Naval Postgraduate school has been an interesting ride and it wouldn't have been the same without them by my side.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AFQT	Armed Forces Qualification Test
ASAD	All-Service Accession Data
ASVAB	Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery
CO	Commanding Officer
COI	Centers of Influence
CNO	Chief of Naval Operations
CNP	Chief of Naval Personnel
CNRC	Commander Navy Recruiting Command
DEP	Delayed Entry Program
DOD	Department of Defense
FY	Fiscal Year
MEPS	Military Entrance Processing Station
MEPCOM	Military Entrance Processing Command
NETC	Naval Education and Training Command
NRC	Navy Recruiting Command
OIC	Officer-in-Charge
RTC	Recruit Training Command
SECNAV	Secretary of the Navy



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I. INTRODUCTION

The United States Navy is critical to the Department of Defense's efforts to safeguard national security, deter threats to the American public, and promote democracy and American prosperity. In order to effectively carry out its mission, the Navy must continually recruit the best and brightest that America has to offer. Despite a history of recruiting success since the inception of the All-Volunteer Force, the Navy as well as the other branches of the Department of Defense, are currently facing unprecedented challenges across the recruiting domain. The robust civilian labor market, divisive political climate exacerbated by mainstream media organizations, increased competition for talent, and an ever-shrinking pool of American youth who meet eligibility requirements are all contributing factors to the difficult recruiting environment.

This thesis aims to identify additional factors that affect the recruiting enterprise including both internal and external factors to the U.S. Navy. Examples of internal factors include larger Navy policy, recruiting policy, budgetary restraints, etc., that the Navy has direct control over. Examples of external factors include youth eligibility, economic conditions, societal and cultural influences, etc., that the Navy cannot directly control. Through a comprehensive analysis of the existing literature, interviews with recruiting leadership, and other relevant recruiting data, this study sheds light on the issues faced by Navy recruiting.

A. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This thesis addresses the following research questions.

1. What were the most prominent challenges faced by the Navy in achieving their Fiscal Year 2022 Navy recruiting goals? What challenges have been present in Fiscal Year 2023?
2. What internal and external factors pose the greatest risk to maintaining an all-volunteer force and the continued success of Navy recruiting?



B. APPROACH

Addressing these research questions requires firsthand knowledge of recruiting operations in the current environment. This study employed a qualitative research design using in-depth interviews with Navy Talent Acquisition Group Commanding Officers (COs) as the primary data collection method. The aim of this research was to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences and perspectives of Navy Talent Acquisition Group Commanding Officers on the status of their accession goals, barriers to success, the effects of structural re-organization on recruiting success, and personal recommendations for change.

The remainder of this thesis is organized in the following manner: Chapter II is an in-depth background on the structure and function of the Navy recruiting organization. This chapter also outlines the organizational changes that Navy Recruiting Command (NRC) has undergone in recent years. Chapter III is a literature review chapter that analyzes studies pertaining to Navy recruiting and the population that makes up its target market. Chapter IV describes the nature of the interviews conducted with Navy recruiting leadership as well as the findings resulting from the interviews. Lastly, Chapter V outlines conclusions and recommendations from the entire qualitative analysis.

C. FINDINGS

Past studies on military recruiting revealed that 71 percent of today's youth are ineligible for military service due to medical disqualification, drug use, or several other factors (Gilroy et al., 2020). They have also shown that propensity to serve in the military is at its lowest point in over 20 years (JAMRS, 2022). Propensity to serve among males specifically, has dropped from 22 percent to 11 percent in the last seven years (JAMRS, 2022). Coincidentally, when polled, the proportion of today's youth who believe that they will have no difficulty finding a job in their local community is at its highest point in 20 years (JAMRS, 2022). Studies have shown that a 10 percent drop in civilian unemployment rate will reduce high quality enlistments by 2 to 4 percent (Warner, 2012). A recent study also determined that Navy Recruiting Districts that transitioned to the Navy Talent Acquisition Group operating model in the three years before the pandemic saw a nine



percentage point decrease in high quality enlistments over the 24 months following transformation (Kollar, 2022).

My study found that recruiting commands struggled with improper or inadequate manning in both recruiting and support staff billets. The Navy Talent Acquisition Groups are receiving poorly screened recruiters from the Fleet, and the process to remove poor recruiters is onerous. Many high schools, colleges, and universities used COVID-19 policies as a veil to reset expectations in terms of recruiter access, and many previously held relationships or Centers of Influence (COIs) were lost. Historically low unemployment and the highly competitive job market are outpacing the Navy in terms of compensation and benefits. The current advertising strategy is inefficient and often overshadowed by negative media coverage. Lastly, rushing the transformation process for a large segment of the Navy recruiting enterprise during a global pandemic had far-reaching implications on recruiting commands, their mission, and the Sailors who struggled through it.

D. LIMITATIONS

This study revealed several trends based on responses from interview participants, which highlighted significant uses faced by the Navy recruiting enterprise. However, it is worth noting that the study only included a small percentage of recruiting leadership, and Navy Talent Acquisition Groups from Navy Recruiting Region West were underrepresented, potentially limiting the scope of the findings. While the views expressed by the interviewees may not be representative of the entire organization, they provide valuable insights into the challenges facing Navy recruiting.



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II. BACKGROUND

A. HISTORY

Since the inception of the United States Navy on October 13, 1775, there have been Navy recruiters dedicated to attracting talented individuals to join America's maritime force. The responsibility for managing Navy recruiting has changed hands many times over the years, with recruiters being assigned to the Marine Committee during the Revolutionary War, the Secretary of the Navy, Bureau of Construction and Repair, Bureau of Navigation in the years that followed, and the Bureau of Naval Personnel in 1942 (NRC, 2022). The Chief of Naval Personnel retained responsibility for Navy recruiting until April 6, 1971, when the "Secretary of the Navy established Navy Recruiting Command in preparation for the United States to end its conscription requirement," with the last draft call occurring in December of 1972 (NRC, 2022). Navy Recruiting Command has evolved its policies, recruiting strategies, and organizational structure over time. I will first describe Navy Recruiting Command's legacy organizational structure prior to 2017 followed by the Navy Talent Acquisition Group Transformation model introduced in 2017 and progressively implemented until 2021.

B. LEGACY STRUCTURE

1. Navy Recruiting Command (NRC)

Navy Recruiting Command is an echelon-three headquarters lead by a Rear-Admiral that falls under the Naval Education and Training Command (NETC), an echelon-two command (Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, 2022). NRC employs a large staff that is ultimately responsible for the success of the Navy's recruiting mission that it establishes based on constraints such as Congressionally mandated Navy end-strength, retention metrics, and training space availability. Navy Recruiting Command's mission and vision statements are as follows:

- **Mission** - Leverage an inspirational culture to inform, attract, influence, and hire the highest quality candidates from America's diverse talent pool to allow America's Navy to assure mission success and establish



the foundation for Sailors to thrive in a life-changing experience (Navy Recruiting Command, 2022a).

- **Vision** - A people-first team that is the undisputed talent acquisition leader in the Department of Defense (Navy Recruiting Command, 2022a).

2. Navy Recruiting Regions

Navy Recruiting Command is divided into two regions, Navy Recruiting Region East and Navy Recruiting Region West. Each region has its own parallel staffs, management teams for the enlisted and officer missions, and is commanded by a Navy Captain. Each Navy Recruiting Region maintains oversight and responsibility for managing the recruiting mission for 13 Navy Recruiting Districts.

3. Navy Recruiting Districts (NRD)

Prior to the transformation process, there were 26 Navy Recruiting Districts that covered the entirety of the contiguous United States plus Alaska, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico. Each Navy Recruiting District had a staff mirroring their respective Navy Recruiting Region, management teams for officer and enlisted missions, and were led by Navy Commanders. Navy Recruiting Districts were broken down into several smaller divisions with their own officer and enlisted leadership. The Navy Recruiting District received recruiting goals from its respective Navy Recruiting Region and spread its goal equitably amongst the divisions based on the number of assigned recruiters, Navy market share, and historical recruiting statistics for their area of responsibility. Navy Recruiting Districts led and managed over 4,200 production recruiters across the United States (NRC, 2022).

4. Navy Recruiting Stations (NRS)

There are approximately 1,400 Navy Recruiting Stations and Navy Officer Recruiting Stations (NORS) where most of the aforementioned 4,200 Navy recruiters “represent the visible face of the Navy across the United States” (NRC, 2022). Each Navy Recruiting District has an average of 50 Navy Recruiting Stations with variability due to territory size and population density. Each Navy Recruiting Station and Navy Officer Recruiting Station has a small chain of command to ensure that their specific recruiting goals are met. Each division equitably spreads its recruiting goals amongst the Navy



Recruiting Stations within its purview based on similar metrics like number of recruiters assigned, quality of recruiting market, assigned high schools, and historical data.

C. TRANSFORMATION STRUCTURE

1. Navy Recruiting Command (NRC)

NRC began the process of transforming legacy Navy Recruiting Districts into Navy Talent Acquisition Groups in 2017. Navy Recruiting District Portland was the first to transform, with the 25 remaining Navy Recruiting Districts on a transformation schedule through 2023 (Smith, 2020). The goal of transformation was to fundamentally change the recruiting process from the legacy system where a single recruiter would prospect for applicants, manage them through the recruiting and medical process, mentor them in preparation for Recruit Training Command (RTC) or “boot camp,” and ensure they shipped out ready and on-time, to a system where specialized recruiting teams would handle each step of the process and the applicant would move from one step to the next. Rather than having a single point of contact throughout the recruiting process, a prospective applicant would transition from one recruiter to another as they completed procedural milestones and moved along the proverbial recruiting assembly line. Figure 1 is a promotional graphic depicting this operational shift.



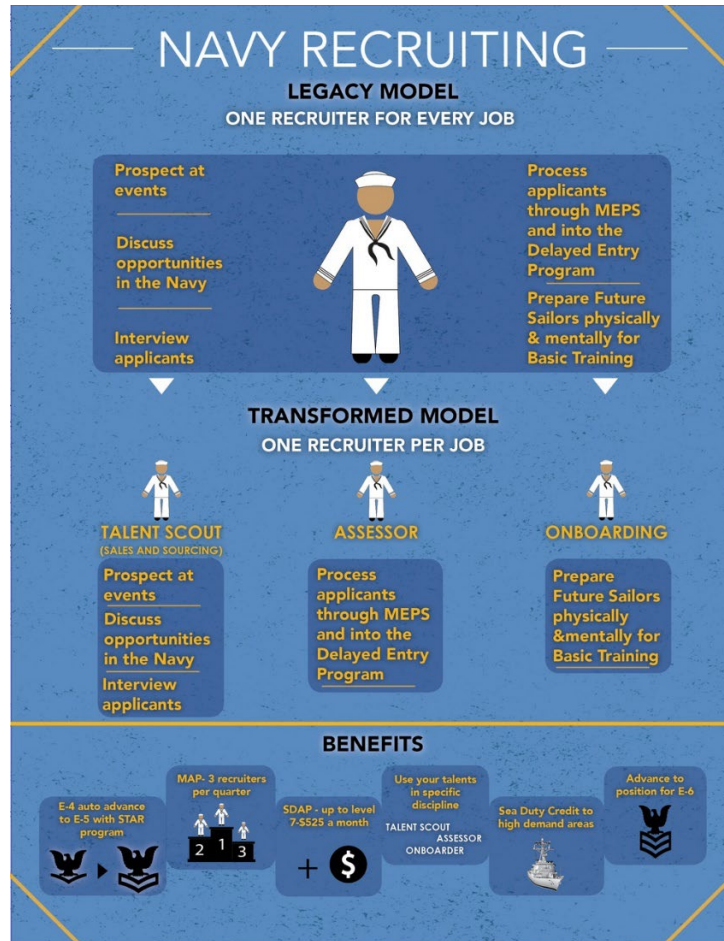


Figure 1. Navy Recruiting Transformation. Source: Newton (2019).

In theory, these new specialized recruiting teams were developed to have recruiters become experts on one aspect of the recruiting process, align a recruiter’s strengths and skill set with one of the three disciplines, and ideally improve the quality of life for recruiters. The three disciplines and their responsibilities under the transformation model are as follows:

Sales and Sourcing (Talent Scout)—Recruiters who excel at the prospecting and sales process would find, meet with, and sell the applicants on the Navy.

Assessing—Assessors would receive the applicants from the sales and sourcing recruiters and process the applicant’s required paperwork or “kit,” shepherd them through

the medical approval process, and complete their contract and schedule a swearing-in ceremony if it wasn't completed at a Military Entrance Processing Station (MEPS).

Onboarding—After signing contracts and swearing the enlistment oath, an applicant becomes a future Sailor. The onboarding team receives the future Sailors from the assessors and continually monitors and mentors them for the duration of their time in the Delayed Entry Program (DEP) until they ship to RTC.

While the transformation schedule wasn't expected to be complete until 2023, the COVID-19 pandemic was a catalyst for NRC leadership to accelerate the process. With the entire recruiting enterprise having to navigate pandemic-era policies and restrictions, the Commander of Navy Recruiting Command set a goal for every remaining Navy Recruiting District to complete the transformation process by the end of 2020 (Smith, 2020).

2. Navy Recruiting Regions

The structure of the Navy Recruiting Regions have gone through several iterations since the transformation process began in 2017. In anticipation of the Navy Recruiting Command enterprise undergoing this transformation, NRC established Region Three as a separate region that would oversee and lead the Navy Recruiting Districts through the transformation process into Navy Talent Acquisition Groups and provide training for one year before managerially returning them to their original Navy Recruiting Region (East or West).

As the transformation process evolved and the enterprise was challenged to accelerate the timeline, NRC disestablished Region Three as a standalone region dedicated to leading Navy Recruiting Districts through transformation and established Region Central as a third major Navy Recruiting Region to complement Region East and Region West (Eshleman, 2020). Navy Recruiting Region Central took control of nine Navy Talent Acquisition Groups, leaving all three Navy Recruiting Regions with fewer Navy Talent Acquisition Groups than they were previously responsible for. This action reduced the administrative burden and allowed all three regions to manage the recruiting mission while continuing to train and mentor the newly transformed Navy Talent Acquisition Groups as Region Three was previously responsible for (Eshleman, 2020).



Navy Recruiting Region Central lasted until the summer of 2022 when another realignment pushed the active duty mission and control of the 26 Navy Talent Acquisition Groups back to Navy Recruiting Regions East and West and established Navy Recruiting Reserve Command (NRRC) as a standalone region to support the Prior Service Reserve mission (Commander, Navy Recruiting Command, 2022). Before the establishment of Navy Recruiting Reserve Command, Navy Talent Acquisition Groups would have a Prior Service Reserve goal in addition to their active duty accession goals, but the realignment removed that responsibility from the Navy Talent Acquisition Groups and places the onus entirely on Navy Recruiting Reserve Command and the recruiters that now fall under them.

This evolutionary period from 2017–2022 saw many changes for Navy Recruiting Command, but Figure 2 provides a visual representation of the Navy Recruiting Regions and the Navy Talent Acquisition Groups assigned to them currently. Navy Recruiting Reserve Command is not represented on the map as they are responsible for the Prior Service Reserve mission for the entirety of the Navy recruiting enterprise.

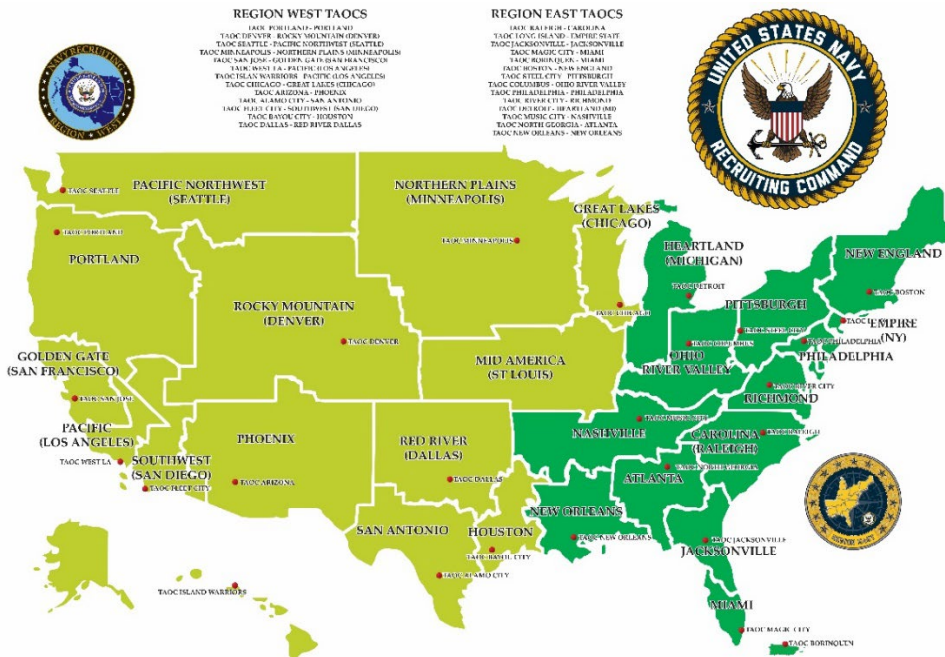


Figure 2. NRC Regions and Navy Talent Acquisition Groups as of 2022. Source: NRC (2022).

3. Navy Talent Acquisition Group (NTAG)

After transformation, the 26 Navy Recruiting Districts became Navy Talent Acquisition Groups. Navy Talent Acquisition Groups retained responsibility for the accession goals assigned by their respective Navy Recruiting Region as well as the administrative oversight over their command just as they did as Navy Recruiting Districts. The biggest organization restructuring that accompanied transformation was the decentralization of the management staff that oversaw enlisted and officer recruiting. The legacy model's recruiting production management staff included a Chief Recruiter, Enlisted Assistant Chief Recruiter (EACR), Officer Assistant Chief Recruiter (OACR), Enlisted Programs Officer (EPO), and Officer Programs Officer (OPO) who the different divisions within the Navy Recruiting District would answer to regarding all matters of recruiting production. After transformation, most of the recruiting production management staff was delegated to the newly formed Talent Acquisition Onboarding Centers. The Navy Talent Acquisition Group headquarters staff consisted of the Commanding Officer, Executive Officer, Command Master Chief, Chief Recruiter, and their administrative personnel.

4. Talent Acquisition Onboarding Center (TAOC)

The Navy Talent Acquisition Group model divided the legacy district into Talent Acquisition Onboarding Centers rather than divisions, and each Talent Acquisition Onboarding Center was led by an Officer-in-Charge (OIC) who assumed the role of the Production Officers (EPO/OPO), and a Director of Personnel and Operations (DPO) who assumed the role of the Assistant Chief Recruiters (EACR/OACR). Talent Acquisition Onboarding Center leadership was responsible for driving and managing enlisted and officer recruiting, processing (or assessing), and onboarding as well as the administrative management of all assigned recruiters.

5. Talent Acquisition Station (TAS)

Navy Recruiting Stations became Talent Acquisition Stations under the new model. The name change did not fundamentally alter the complexion of the legacy Navy Recruiting Stations as they are still the geographically dispersed recruiting offices that



allow recruiters to process applicants for Naval service throughout the country. A Talent Acquisition Station is typically led by a Leading Petty Officer (LPO) and a varying number of recruiters depending on the size, location, and volume of applicants that the Talent Acquisition Station processes.

D. RETURN TO LEGACY RECRUITING

The Navy Recruiting Leadership and Management Manual (RLMM), or the Commander, Navy Recruiting Command Instruction (COMNAVCRUITCOMINST) 1130.19 released on August 31, 2022, officially directed all Navy Talent Acquisition Groups to revert back to operating under the legacy recruiting model. Navy Talent Acquisition groups remain as such in name only, but are organizationally structured in the exact manner described in part B of this chapter. The precise timeline of each Navy Talent Acquisition Group’s reversion is unknown but it is openly understood that some were operating under the legacy structure long before the Navy Recruiting Leadership and Management Manual was released. While most Navy Talent Acquisition Groups had the manning and leadership roles required to operate under the legacy structure, the large-scale reversion in 2021 or 2022 after transformation in 2020 meant that they were fundamentally altering their operational structure for the second time in as many years.

E. RECRUITING FORCE

Navy Talent Acquisition Groups are composed of sailors from many dispositions, serving distinct functions of the recruiting process. Everyone involved at the Navy Talent Acquisition Group level receives a specific level of recruiting training sponsored by the Navy Recruiting Orientation Unit (NORU). Navy Recruiting Orientation Unit is the Navy’s “sole recruiting schoolhouse responsible for the instruction of enlisted and officer personnel in professional sales, prospecting techniques, marketing, applicant processing, recruiting terminology, leadership, ethical behavior, and activity analysis” (NRC, 2023). Outside of Navy Talent Acquisition Group leadership, the individuals responsible for recruiting production generally fall into three main categories: Career Recruiting Force (CRF), Production Recruiter, or Canvasser Recruiter (CANREC).



1. Production Recruiters and Support Billets

Recruiting duty is open to nearly all enlisted rates and pay grades Petty Officer Second Class (E-5) through Senior Chief Petty Officer (E-8), with some caveats for exceptionally qualified Petty Officer Third Class's (E-4) (Bureau of Naval Personnel, 2018). These sailors opt into or are selected for recruiting duty during a shore rotation in the normal career path for their rate. These Sailors are assigned to a Navy Talent Acquisition Group and are distributed to a Talent Acquisition Station as a Talent Scout or assigned to a support role. Support roles include MEPS Liaisons, waivers processing, Navy Classifiers (at MEPS), Nuclear Program liaison, E-Talent representative, among others. Navy officers can also select recruiting duty during a shore rotation during the typical career progression for their designator. Officers are generally assigned to the Officer Recruiting mission and will focus on recruiting for one of several officer missions such as General Officer (Surface Warfare, Aviation, Supply Corps, Intelligence, SEAL/EOD, etc.), Nuclear Propulsion Officer Candidate Program (NUPOC), or medical programs.

2. Career Recruiting Force (CRF)

The Career Recruiting Force is composed of sailors who excelled on recruiting duty and applied to convert their rate to Navy Counselor (Recruiter) or NCR. The scope of the Navy Counselor (Recruiter) rating is defined in the Navy Enlisted Manpower and Personnel Classifications and Occupational Standards (NEOCS) Volume 1.

Navy Counselors (Recruiter) (NCR) develop and implement effective recruiting plans to achieve assigned missions; analyze market trends and recruiting efforts to make adjustments; supervise and coordinate marketing, prospecting, interviewing, processing, classification, and onboarding activities; give presentations to civic groups, workshops, seminars, and targeted populations and their family members on career opportunities in the Navy; provide leadership, career information, mentoring, training, and coaching to assigned personnel, including Future Sailors and Collegiates; network with media, educators, civil officials, and community leaders to foster Navy awareness; manage available resources; and enforce policies, programs, and best business practices to ensure compliance. (Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, 2023, NCR-3)



As experienced and professional recruiters, the Career Recruiting Force community complement the production recruiters and are typically expected to lead and train production recruiters while driving mission success.

3. Canvasser Recruiters

Canvasser Recruiters (CANREC) are part of a recall program for Navy Reservists to voluntarily elect to take active duty orders as production recruiters. Prior to transformation, these personnel would supplement the Navy Recruiting District or Navy Talent Acquisition Group as production recruiters in their area of residence upon activation and be put on the recruiting mission that suited the needs of the command. After transformation and the establishment of the Navy Recruiting Reserve Command (NRRC), Canvasser Recruiters are assigned to Navy Talent Acquisition Groups for administrative support, but report to a separate NRRC chain of command. They are responsible for “a critical majority of the enlisted Navy Reserve recruiting goal and one hundred percent of the officer Navy Reserve goal” (Commander, Navy Recruiting Command, 2022).

From 2017 to 2022, the Navy recruiting enterprise underwent significant modifications. Navy Recruiting Command hastily revamped its organizational structure to a model that was unfamiliar to most of its experienced leadership, during a global pandemic event, only to revert back to the legacy model. The strain of the transformation and reversion process on the success of recruiting operations is undeniable. However, the ensuing chapter describes several supplemental factors affecting recruiting, as identified by past studies on the topic.



III. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews the research on the factors affecting the Navy and the larger Department of Defense (DOD) recruiting. These studies analyze the historical effects of unemployment on recruiting, areas of concern stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, environmental factors that affect recruiting efforts, youth eligibility for enlistment, propensity to serve statistics, and the effects of organizational transformation on recruit quality.

Navy recruiters are consistently seeking to identify candidates who are mentally, morally, and physically qualified for Naval service. Enlisted recruiters' primary market includes individuals who meet the mental, moral, and physical requirements and are age 17 to 21 and attending high school or college. Officer recruiters' primary market is similar but includes individuals who are attending or have graduated with a college degree. Should a potential applicant meet most of the criteria but not all, there is a process in place for an applicant to receive a waiver to gain eligibility for service. Waivers are offered on a case by case basis, vary by service, and can be made available or canceled by service-specific policy updates. Navy recruiters have and continue to face constant, cyclical, and emergent issues that create barriers to accessing and contracting these ideal potential candidates for Naval service.

The global COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on almost every facet of life in the United States of America. Many industries and organizations were continuing to navigate through the fallout and unforeseen implications deep into 2022 and beyond. Military recruiting has in no way been shielded from these effects. For example, Calkins et al. (2022) analyze recruiting performance across the DOD in the wake of the pandemic. Table 1 shows specific details on the performance of the four main services in Fiscal Year 2020 compared to Fiscal Year 2019.



Table 1. Non-prior Service Accessions and Goals. Source: Calkins et al. (2022).

Service	Fiscal Year 2019			Fiscal Year 2020			Percentage Change in Goal, Fiscal Year 2019–Fiscal Year 2020
	Accession Goal	Accession Achieved	Percentage of Goal Achieved	Accession Goal	Accession Achieved	Percentage of Goal Achieved	
Army	68,000	68,185	100.3%	61,200	61,249	100.1%	-10.0%
Navy	39,000	39,027	100.1%	39,600	39,678	100.2%	1.5%
Marine Corps	31,767	31,777	100.0%	28,208	28,048	99.4%	-11.2%
Air Force	32,300	32,421	100.4%	26,373	26,373	100%	-18.3%

Calkins et al. (2022) note that while every service reached its accessions goals, except for the Marine Corps who still achieved 99.4 percent, it is possible that the three services besides the Navy lowered their accession goals midyear in response to pandemic policies limiting face to face interaction.

While achieving and surpassing the Fiscal Year 2020 accession goal in the wake of the pandemic was a testament to the resiliency of Navy recruiters, they point to the services experiencing recruiting difficulties in Fiscal Years 2021 and 2022. Figure 3 compares Navy enlistment contracts by month from Fiscal Year 2019 to Fiscal Year 2020.





Figure 3. Navy Enlistment Contracts, by Month, FY 2019 – FY 2020.
Source: Calkins et al. (2022).

Not all recruiting contracts end up becoming accessions for numerous reasons. Attrition is highly scrutinized and proactively managed by recruiting personnel, but every recruiting command deals with future sailors who have an emerging medical condition, get into legal trouble, fall out of Navy height/weight standards, or simply change their mind prior to shipping to Recruit Training Command (RTC). While accessions remained constant for the Navy, enlistment contracts also known as New Contract Objective (NCO), declined significantly in the months after the start of the pandemic (Calkins et al., 2022). This reduction in contracts meant that the Navy had to ship more of its Delayed Entry Program (DEP) future Sailors to RTC in order to achieve its accession mission. Depleting the pool of recruits in the DEP at the end of Fiscal Year 2020 put a strain on Navy recruiting in Fiscal Year 2021 and beyond.

Aside from the extenuating circumstances created by an unprecedented global pandemic, there are multiple factors that create headwinds for military recruiters across the Department of Defense. In a recent study, Gilroy et al. (2020) outlined key environmental factors affecting recruiting and the effectiveness of recruiting resources and policies. According to them, the main environmental factors affecting successful recruiting are the youth population’s eligibility to enlist, shifting demographics, economic factors,



educational opportunities, and military engagements (Gilroy et al., 2020). The authors cited United States Census Bureau data from 2017 to highlight race/ethnicity projections including a substantial drop in the proportion of white youth in the 17–24 year old population and increases of Asian and Hispanic representation among this population (Gilroy et al., 2020). These demographic shifts pose two problems for recruiting. First, there are disparities in AFQT scores, with “Hispanics and African Americans being significantly less likely to score in the upper half of the AFQT” (Gilroy et al., 2020). Second, “47 percent of African American and Hispanic adults are obese, compared to 38 percent of white adults” (Gilroy et al., 2020). These projected demographic shifts will shrink the pool of medically eligible and higher scoring AFQT applicants for Naval service even further.

Figure 4 is a graphical representation of the youth eligibility for military service as of 2020. The staggering elimination of 71 percent of American youth from military eligibility due to drug use, medical issues, misconduct, aptitude, or a combination of factors, is exacerbated even further when propensity to serve statistics are applied, dropping the eligibility “to 3.2 percent for AFQT I-IIIIB youth and 2.2 percent of AFQT I-III A youth – the military’s prime market” (Gilroy et al., 2022). There are policies in place that allow for certain conditions that would initially disqualify an applicant to apply for enlistment waivers but they become increasingly more complex if the applicant were to fall into the category with 31 percent of today’s youth that are disqualified for multiple reasons. Waivers are never guaranteed and often extremely time consuming, pulling recruiters away from continuing to prospect for more qualified applicants. As propensity to serve continues to decline in the youth population, recruiters regularly have to settle with applicants who require waivers because of the fleeting numbers of people who are interested in joining the service.



Figure 3. Eligibility for military service

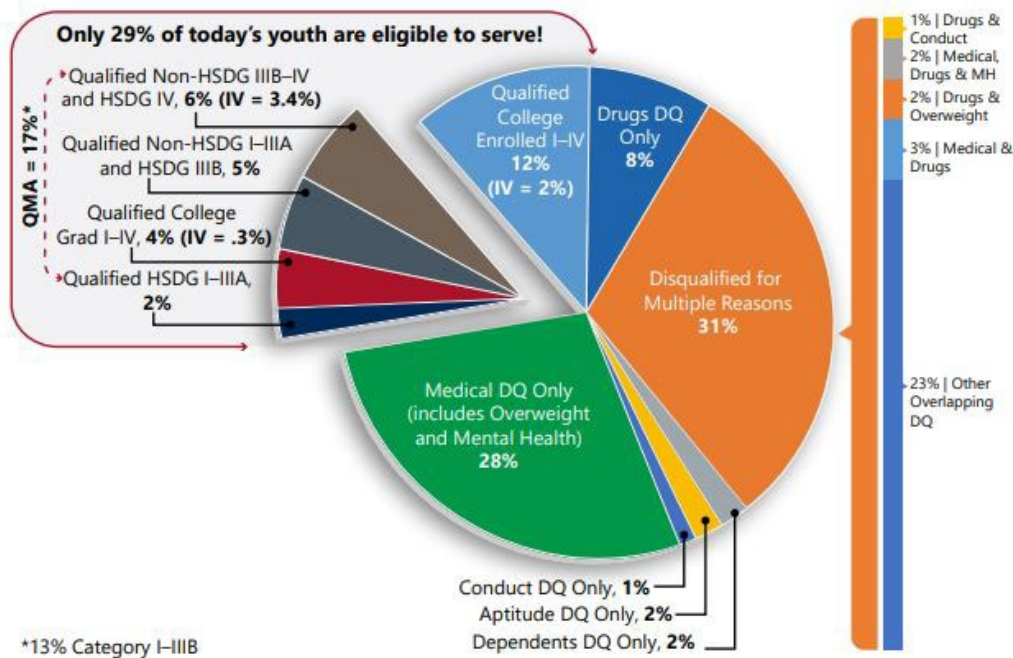


Figure 4. Youth Eligibility for Military Service. Source: Gilroy et al. (2020).

Each year, the Joint Advertising, Marketing Research & Studies, a division within the Department of Defense, conducts several youth polls to examine economic conditions affecting recruiting and attitudes toward military service. The “mail-based survey fielded from September 3, 2021, to February 28, 2022” covered a “stratified random sample of 3,394 youths ages 16 through 24” and was “weighted to reflect the general population on gender, age, race/ethnicity, educational attainment, and region” (JAMRS, 2022). One of the most broadly referenced statistics that JAMRS produces with its youth poll is general military propensity. Youth ages 16 to 21 are asked, “In the next few years, how likely is it that you will be serving in the Military?” and are given the response options “Definitely, Probably, Probably Not, and Definitely Not” (JAMRS, 2022). The Fall 2021 youth poll concluded that only nine percent of those surveyed would “definitely/probably” be serving in the military in the next few years, the lowest aggregate propensity since 2007 (JAMRS, 2022). Figure 5 shows the variation in propensity from 2001 to 2021. Aggregate propensity to serve peaked at 16 percent in the years immediately following September 11, 2001, but

waned to nine percent by 2007. It systematically rose to 15 percent by 2014 and has been on a steady gradual decline to its current level. Propensity to serve amongst females has remained relatively steady (between five percent and nine percent) since 2014 but amongst males, propensity has decreased significantly, declining from 22 percent in 2014 to 11 percent in 2021 (JAMRS, 2022).

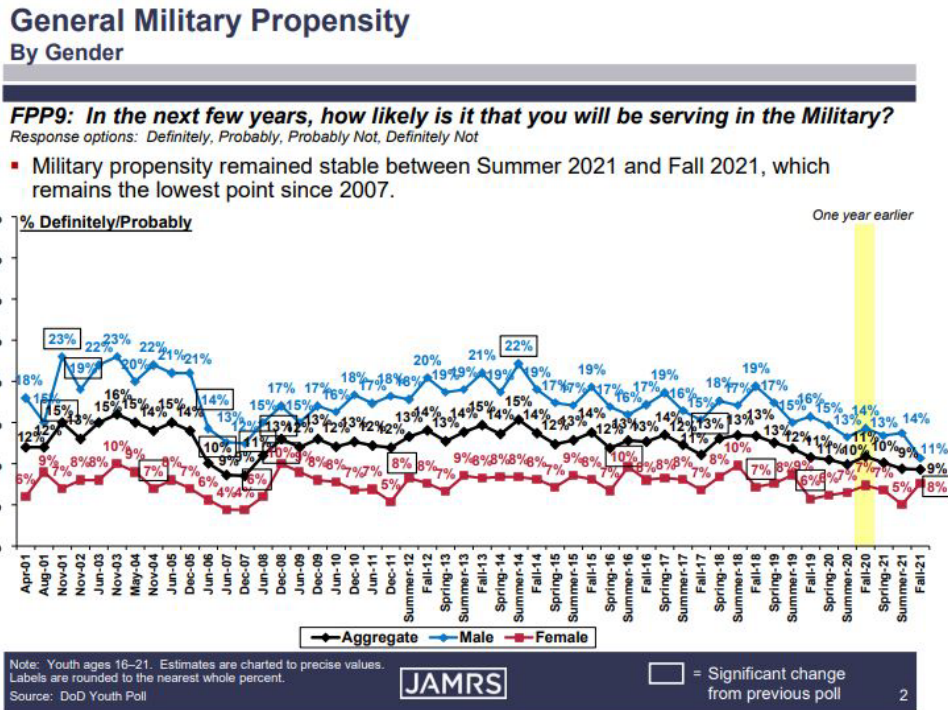


Figure 5. DOD Youth Poll: Fall 2021 Propensity Update. Source: JAMRS (2022).

The youth poll also asked survey participants “How difficult is it for someone your age to get a full-time job in your community?” and are given the response options “Impossible, Very Difficult, Somewhat Difficult, and Not at All Difficult” (JAMRS, 2022). As Figure 6 shows, 81 percent of survey respondents answered that getting a full-time job was “Somewhat/Not at All Difficult” and 16 percent found it “Very Difficult/Impossible,” the highest disparity in 20 years (JAMRS, 2022).



U.S. Military and Economic Conditions

Difficulty of Finding a Job

- In Fall 2021, youths' confidence in their ability to get a full-time job within their communities remained stable compared to Summer 2021.

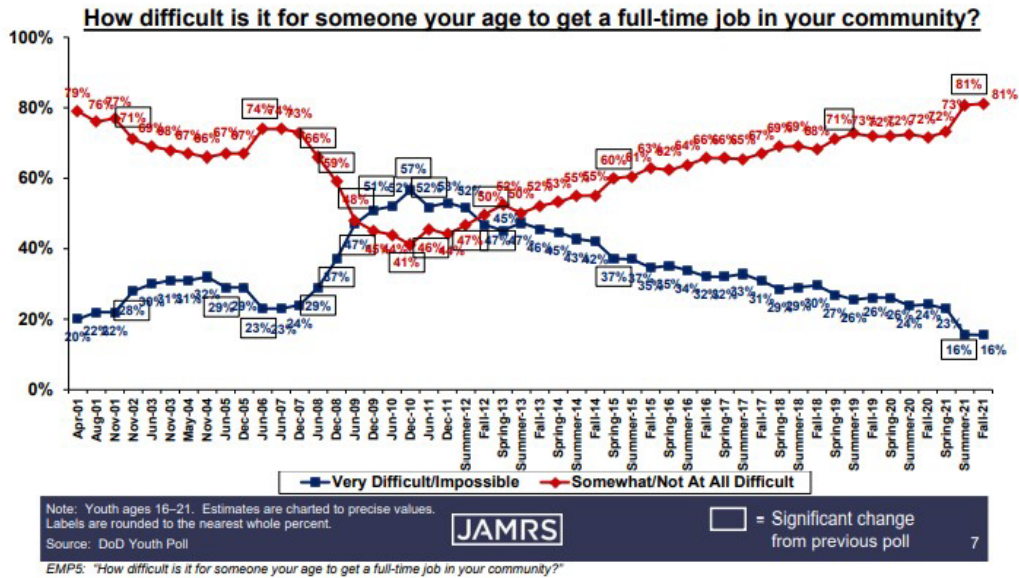


Figure 6. DOD Youth Poll: Fall 2021 Propensity Update. Source: JAMRS (2022)

Finally, the survey asks respondents to rank the top 10 reasons that they would consider joining the military as well as the top ten reasons they would not consider joining the military. The top three reasons why youth ages 16–21 would join the military were: pay/money, pay for future education, and travel (JAMRS, 2022). The top three reasons why they would not join the military were: possibility of physical injury/death, possibility of PTSD or other emotional/psychological issues, and leaving family/friends (JAMRS, 2022). These reasons for not wanting to join the military should be prime targets in future Navy advertising campaigns in an attempt to dispel these fears in the youth population.

It is unsurprising that in the post-pandemic economic environment, today's youth do not find it difficult to find a job. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the national unemployment rate is at a historically low 3.5 percent (2023). As with any employer looking to hire high-quality employees, low unemployment, and robust job growth lead to competition for a smaller pool of potential hires. Low unemployment has routinely been



linked to difficulties for military recruiting, but in a supporting paper for the Eleventh Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation, it was revealed how impactful it really is.

Recruiting and retention are sensitive to the state of the economy. Studies indicate that a 10 percent decrease in the civilian unemployment rate will reduce high-quality enlisted recruiting by 2–4 percent. Retention also declines when unemployment decreases, but appears to be less sensitive to the state of the economy than recruiting. (Warner, 2012)

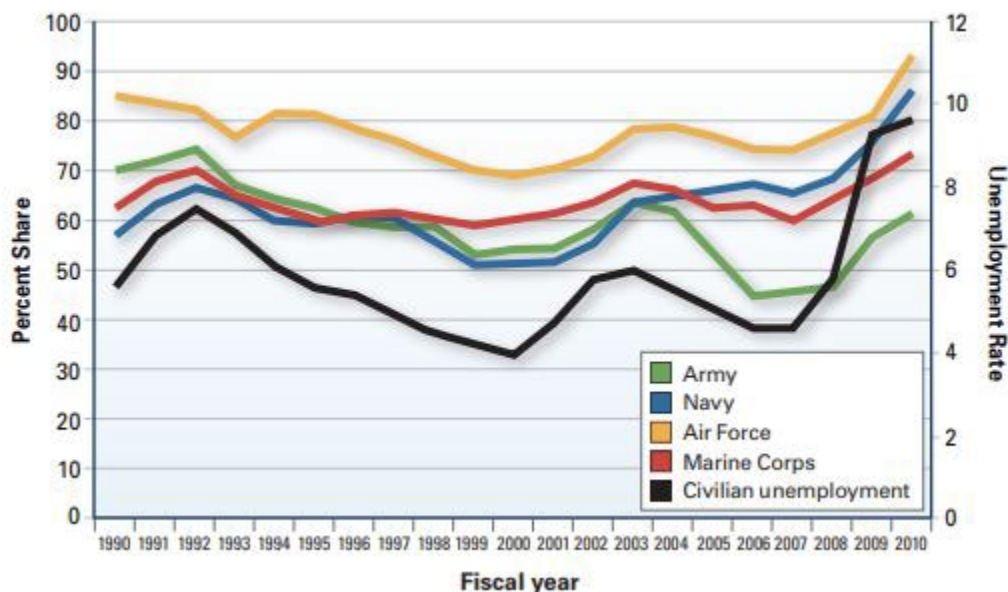


Figure 7. High Quality Enlistments by Service and Unemployment, FY 1990–2010. Source: Warner (2012).

Figure 7 is a graphical representation of the sensitivity of recruiting high-quality applicants to the civilian unemployment rate. While the low unemployment rates are creating competition, so too are the competition of benefit packages from civilian employers. The top two reasons cited as reasons to join the military in the JAMRS Youth Poll were money and college tuition assistance (JAMRS, 2022) however, according to Farrington (2021), more civilian employers are adding college tuition to compensation packages along with competitive pay and health benefits such as Wal-Mart, Starbucks, Chick-fil-A, and Amazon, among others. These companies started offering college benefits to be “more competitive in the hiring space” (Farrington, 2021). Civilian corporations



adding similar benefits to what the military is offering dilutes the leverage that military recruiters have had in the past.

While these studies have highlighted the external factors affecting military recruiting, there are internal factors within the Navy’s recruiting domain that have compounded the problems. In 2017, the United States Navy Recruiting Command began the process of transitioning legacy Navy Recruiting Districts into Navy Talent Acquisition Groups. This process began with one Navy Recruiting District at a time but was sped up during the COVID-19 pandemic and Navy Recruiting Command directed all legacy Navy Recruiting Districts to transition to Navy Talent Acquisition Groups by the end of 2020—far ahead of the original schedule of 2023 (Hack, 2021). Kollar (2022) identified significant deficiencies in the Navy Talent Acquisition Groups who transitioned in the initial stages of the overall transformation. The first five Navy Recruiting Districts who transitioned between 2017 and 2018 were Navy Recruiting Districts Portland, New Orleans, Rocky Mountains, Great Plains, and Nashville (Kollar, 2022). Using accession data covering 2010 to 2019 from the Defense Manpower Data Center, he conducted an event study to highlight the differences in the quality of accessions by newly transitioned Navy Talent Acquisition Groups in the months after their transformation was complete. Figure 8 displays the effects of transformation on recruit quality for the aggregate of the first five commands.



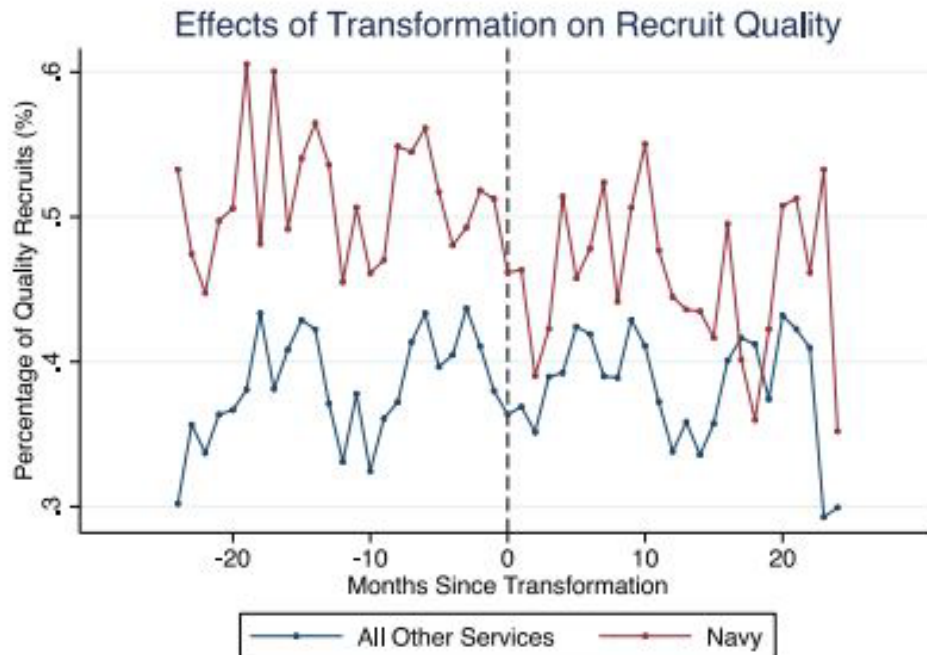


Figure 8. Quality Accessions Comparison of the First Five Navy Recruiting Districts to Undergo Transformation. Source: Kollar (2022).

While quality accessions were decreasing for all services, the Navy suffered a nine percentage point decrease in the months after transformation compared to a 3.3 percentage point decrease for other services over the same period. These findings expose deficiencies in Navy Talent Acquisition Groups adapting to the new recruiting model creating internal disadvantages. In an increasingly difficult recruiting environment in post-pandemic America, the decision to transition the remaining legacy Navy Recruiting Districts to the new model all at once put a significant strain on the Navy Recruiting enterprise and exacerbated the declining ability to recruit high quality accessions highlighted in the study by Kollar (2022).

Military recruiting has been studied at length since the birth of the all-volunteer force in 1973. While economic factors have always been a focal point, the research literature has increasingly focused on demographics and physical eligibility as the population of the United States has become more diverse and less healthy. This thesis complements this literature by conducting interviews of the Navy’s recruiting leadership, those on the “frontlines” who are working diligently to overcome these factors to achieve

their assigned accession missions. While studying recruiting, economic, and population data is important, gathering information directly from the source at the ground level of the recruiting mission offers valuable insight on how the Navy can steer the recruiting enterprise in a successful direction.



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IV. RECRUITING LEADERSHIP INTERVIEWS

In this chapter, I describe the background of the interviewees who participated in my study, the interview questions, a summary of the interview findings, and key trends that emerged throughout the process. My goal was to interview Commanding Officers (COs) of Navy Talent Acquisition Groups to gain insight from these Navy leaders who work tirelessly to overcome the challenges in the Navy recruiting domain on a daily basis. These leaders possess direct, firsthand knowledge of the current recruiting environment, barriers to success for their commands, and valuable recommendations for improvement.

A. INTERVIEW BACKGROUND

I limited my pool of potential interviewees to Naval officers currently serving as Navy Talent Acquisition Group Commanding Officers, and those who were serving as Navy Talent Acquisition Group Commanding Officers during Fiscal Year 2022. The narrow pool of potential interviewees is due to the focus of this study on the factors that led to Fiscal Year 2022 being the most challenging recruiting year on record and Fiscal Year 2023 projecting to be just as challenging. Using the NTAG Leadership page on the CNRC website and the Global Directory Service available via the MyNavy Portal, I compiled a list of names and email addresses for all 26 Commanding Officers. Rather than conducting a random sample from this limited pool, I emailed the entire list of COs individually with an invitation to participate in my interview process and a brief introduction regarding the nature of the study as well as my background and motivation. See Appendix A for the original email invitation.

Of the 26 invitations, eight COs (31%) were able to participate. All participants were Commanders, or O-5 in rank and two of the eight were women (25%). Currently, there are five female Navy Talent Acquisition Group COs out of 26 (19%), so female Navy Talent Acquisition Group COs were well represented in my interview pool. Out of the eight respondents, six of them command Navy Talent Acquisition Groups in Navy Recruiting Region East (75%) and two command Navy Talent Acquisition Groups in Navy Recruiting



Region West (25%). Navy Recruiting Region West was underrepresented as both they and Navy Recruiting Region East contain 13 Navy Talent Acquisition Groups (50% each).

Interviews were conducted virtually through the Zoom Video Communication platform and direct telephone communication based on the technological and logistical availability of each respondent. The interviews were conducted between February 8, 2023, and February 28, 2023, and varied in duration depending on interviewee responses but averaged approximately one hour. No virtual meeting or telephone call was recorded, and in order to ensure candid feedback on potential problems and solutions, all respondents were assured that their responses would not be directly attributed to them in any way. I conducted the interviews personally and took detailed notes throughout each interview. The interviews were conducted in accordance with the cognizant Institutional Review Board under Human Subjects Research IRB Determination #: NPS.2023.0037-DD-N. The views expressed by the interviewees are those of the individuals and do not reflect the official policy or position of Navy Recruiting Command, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

I began the individual interviews with a more detailed explanation of my personal background in recruiting, what this thesis is expected to accomplish, and my motivation for seeking their insight. I assured them again that I would be summarizing their responses and highlighting trends across the spectrum of interviews and that they would remain individually anonymous. The interviews continued with questions related to three main categories: (1) accession goals in Fiscal Years 2022 and 2023, (2) barriers to recruiting success, and (3) transformation from Navy Recruiting Districts to Navy Talent Acquisition Groups. I concluded the interviews by asking for the respondents' top three recommendations that they would make to CNRC or the Chief of Naval Personnel (CNP) to improve their Navy Talent Acquisition Group's ability to be successful in the future. Appendix B lists the interview questions as originally designed. Early in the interview process, I ceased asking if Navy Talent Acquisition Groups were still operating under the new recruiting model or if they reverted back to the legacy model because it was brought to my attention that the reversion had been mandated across the Navy recruiting enterprise.



B. FINDINGS

Accession Goals

My first questions asked (1) did your Navy Talent Acquisition Group meet all assigned goals (Enlisted and Officer) for FY22 and (2) if not, in what areas did you fall short? The response was overwhelmingly negative with most respondents indicating that they did not meet their assigned recruiting goals. Only one respondent reported that they met their shipping (accession) goal, and one was on track to meet their goal before their goal was adjusted to account for other shortfalls. None of the respondents met their annual enlisted New Contract Objective goal. Several respondents noted that they only made their New Contract Objective goal 3 or 4 months out of the year with one who missed every month of Fiscal Year 2022. The consensus from respondents was that about halfway through Fiscal Year 2022, “making mission was off the table.” The shipping goal (which the Navy made overall in FY22) is the most critical, as it is a large piece of the manpower equation in conjunction with retention to ensure that the Navy meets its Congressionally mandated end-strength numbers.

The New Contract Objective goal accounts for the newly contracted future sailors that make up the Delayed Entry Program (DEP) pool which eventually feeds the shipping goal. There was blanket consensus from all respondents to the next questions regarding the status of their DEP pool at the end of Fiscal Year 2022 and the beginning of Fiscal Year 2023. All respondents reported having to critically deplete their DEP pools to “historically low levels” for Navy Recruiting Command to achieve the national shipping goal. Most reported that their DEP pools were around 50 percent of their usual levels with one respondent stating, “we started FY23 with less than 100 future Sailors in DEP when we traditionally start the FY with more than 1,000 in DEP.”

There were mixed responses as to their Navy Talent Acquisition Group’s success through the first four months of Fiscal Year 2023 with six respondents reporting that they have made New Contract Objective goal at least once so far, but all were still behind overall at the time of our interview. Every respondent whose Navy Talent Acquisition Group had made goal at some point thus far, attributed their success in part to a temporary policy



change allowing them to contract a certain percentage of Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT) Category IV (10-30 percentile score) applicants. Beginning Fiscal Year 2023 with a historically low DEP pool and continuing to fail to meet New Contract Objective goals is a “recipe for disaster” according to one respondent.

Barriers

I asked five questions in the barriers segment including (1) what are the three biggest internal barriers that affected recruiters’ ability to achieve their assigned goals, (2) what are the three biggest external barriers that affected recruiters’ ability to achieve assigned goals, (3) did the effects of local COVID-19 policies in the community affect your recruiters, (4) did your MEPS conversion drastically change from Fiscal Year 2021 to Fiscal Year 2022, and (5) did the transition to Military Health System (MHS) Genesis in 2022 have any effect on your MEPS conversion? Military Health System (MHS) Genesis is an electronic medical record system that was introduced to Military Entrance Processing Sites (MEPS) nationwide in 2022. I elaborated on internal barriers as factors that the Navy had control over or could impose control over with policy changes, and/or barriers resulting from internal decision making. External barriers were explained as factors that the Navy could not control but could possibly circumvent or overcome with new policy and sound decision making.

The two most common answers to the question regarding internal barriers were manning and the recruiter screening process. All but two respondents answered that their Navy Talent Acquisition Group was not manned to the appropriate level and but one of them still acknowledged that it is an issue across the recruiting enterprise. Manning issues varied between shortages of recruiters and support staff with one respondent reporting being “manned around 60%” and another being “manned to attain 12% of the market” in their area when they should be “manned to attain 24% based on [ASAD] take rate.” One respondent detailed their issues with support roles and how those shortfalls spill over into recruiter shortfalls.

Detailers are not filling support roles. I haven’t had a billeted System Administrator or Public Affairs Officer for several years. I’ve had to pull



Sailors off-the-bag (no longer a goaled recruiter) to fill roles on the administrative side. Fit needs to be the priority rather than fill.

Another respondent said “manning is the single biggest barrier” to their Navy Talent Acquisition Group being successful. Over half of respondents mentioned that the recruiter screening process was one of their three biggest barriers to success. According to one respondent, they “get Sailors checking in with no driver’s license, active mental health issues, and financial problems.” Another said, “Fleet and Squadron COs need to take the 1306 screening process seriously, and not just sign off to get them [unqualified or inadequate Sailors] out of their command.” And another voiced in support of a better screening process, “we need higher quality, the Marine Corps requires 5.0 recruiters do why doesn’t the Navy?.” To quote another respondent below, they talked about quality of recruiters overall as a barrier which ties back to the initial screening process.

It’s the lack of resilience and lack of work ethic in most recruiters. No Sailor comes to recruiting to fail however, after 100 “not interested applicants,” it starts to affect a Sailor’s confidence in not only being able to do their job, but some even start to question why they joined the Navy. They come to recruiting thinking they are coming to easy shore duty, but recruiting is far from shore duty.

In response to the second question regarding external barriers to recruiting success, the job market/economy and lingering effects from the COVID-19 pandemic were the most common responses. These responses were often intertwined with an answer regarding the less than ideal Navy advertising budget which was mentioned both as an internal and external barrier by several respondents. One respondent said, “advertising is woefully underfunded.” These barriers were often tied together such that being undermanned leads to less recruiters in the field, which leads to “less Navy visibility” in the community, and when the advertising isn’t reaching the target market, it is hard to compete with the “Amazon warehouse down the street, who offers more money, similar benefits (college tuition, health insurance, etc.), no drug tests, and they don’t have to leave mom and dad’s house.” Appendix C provides a graphical depiction of the Navy’s lower advertising budget as it compares to other services as of 2018. Most respondents agreed that the labor market and fierce competition from competitors with similar if not better compensation packages than the Navy were a huge barrier to success.



Many respondents acknowledged that COVID-19 policies are not directly affecting recruiters as much anymore, but that lingering effects still endure. The most common lingering effect is their Navy Talent Acquisition Group's relationship with high schools and colleges/universities. Several respondents noted that many high schools used COVID-19 policy to reset expectations and got comfortable with strict visitor access control. Many of these schools have been reluctant to allow visitors or have tightened their visitor policies despite having been open for in-person learning for some time. Developing Centers of Influence (COIs) or relationships with school officials is critical to recruiting success and "losing two or more years in schools due to COVID-19 has set any relationship recruiters had with their schools back to square one." Loss of COIs and recruiter turnover compounded the issue according to one respondent.

Schools were slow and wary to begin allowing access to recruiters. By then, due to scheduled recruiter turnover and in some cases, poor communication maintained from recruiters who remained in the command due to [a lack of] training, in many cases the relationships with those schools were not strong enough to guarantee early and periodic access.

Longer-term COVID-19 policy effects on the students themselves were also noted by several respondents. Learning loss from pandemic era school policies were blamed for lower student test scores with one respondent stating that, "the number one reason we have missed goal is applicants failing to pass the ASVAB." COVID-19 policies affected new and experienced recruiters in different ways as everyone had to adapt to recruiting in a new environment. As one respondent put it, "a lot of NCs converted to career recruiters during a period of recruiting ease so they don't know how to use the recruiting tools/systems to go recruit or teach their recruiters how to go recruit." New recruiters and leadership alike attended virtual training during the pandemic that they would have otherwise received in person. One respondent put it bluntly, "NORU [Navy Recruiting Orientation Unit] is joke at this point," referencing the recruiting training school's effectiveness during the pandemic and in training new recruiters in the post-pandemic recruiting environment.

There were several other responses to the external barrier question including the increasingly divisive political environment, COVID-19 vaccine mandates, and negative media coverage. The political environment, negative media coverage, and advertising



shortfalls are strongly connected. The current advertising strategy is not formidable enough to overcome negative headlines such as “Sailor suicides” or the media’s frequent public message that “the military is going woke” or that “servicemembers are being kicked out for refusing the COVID vaccine.” One respondent said, “every negative headline about the Navy hurts recruiting,” and another said “[the Navy] lacks a message. [The United States] Not being in a wartime environment doesn’t put the military in the public’s face as often so when they see messaging, it’s mostly negative headlines.” Most respondents admitted that the COVID-19 mandates didn’t have a substantial impact on their ability to recruit however, they did see a rise in unsure applicants using it as an “excuse to stop their recruiter from pursuing them.”

Responses to the questions regarding MEPS conversion and complications from the transition to Military Health System Genesis varied, but there was a strong consensus that MEPCOM utilizing Military Health System Genesis has drastically increased the time it takes to formally contract an interested applicant. Most respondents acknowledged a slight decline in MEPS conversion in the time immediately following the activation of Military Health System Genesis but saw a rebound to, or close to, pre-Military Health System Genesis levels. One respondent cited Military Health System Genesis as “the biggest external barrier to their recruiters’ success,” but this was an outlier among the group. Respondents reported very different average time to contract for their commands based on several factors such as geographic dispersion, different MEPS processes, and number of MEPS available to their command, but all acknowledged that Military Health System Genesis slowed their command down. One respondent said that Military Health System Genesis “increased average time of projection to completing their physical from five days to over 30 days, and in some cases, 180 days or more.” Another noted “[Military Health System] Genesis pushed “contact to contract” range from around 40 days to well over 60 days” and “visits to MEPS for the average future Sailor is around 1.8. Almost everyone is going back for a second or third look.” One more respondent summed up what I considered to be the consensus opinion that, “[Military Health System Genesis] is not breaking the system but it is delaying contracts.” Despite two respondents having significant problems with the employment of Military Health System Genesis, most



acknowledged that it was here it stay, will get easier to work with over time, and can be improved with policy and cooperation with MEPCOM and medical providers.

Transformation

All respondents that were interviewed were associated with commands that transitioned from the legacy Navy Recruiting District model to the Navy Talent Acquisition Model in an expedited fashion during calendar year 2020. By the start of calendar year 2021, every command was operating under the Navy Talent Acquisition Group model. Some began to transition back to the legacy model internally as they were failing under the new model and eventually, the entire recruiting enterprise reverted to the legacy model when the updated Navy Recruiting Leadership and Management Manual (RLMM) was released on August 31, 2022. I asked the interviewees two questions regarding this process, (1) what were the biggest challenges your command faced during the transformation process, and (2) did the transformation affect your ability to make recruiting goals?

The consensus about transforming from a Navy Recruiting District to a Navy Talent Acquisition Group ahead of the planned schedule was that of confusion and inconsistency. Some Navy Talent Acquisition Groups were able to maintain success through the transformation process but most that weren't "did not have the manning in place to support the new model" regardless of how well they planned for it. Another consensus response was that transforming during the pandemic lead to failures due to the "sum of too many changes." One respondent said that "recruiters were so confused about how to do their jobs. [Recruiting] Failure was more a result of transformation than COVID-19" and another summed it up by saying, "we shifted our focus to transformation instead of developing a strategy to counter the effects of the pandemic." One respondent claimed that their command was a perennial top performer and they "stopped making mission as soon as they went through transformation." Many of the respondents attributed the failures of transformation to a lack of adequate training. One respondent noted that, "the training for the transformation process was rushed or not existent. A few local stations received training and the rest of the Navy Talent Acquisition Group had to be trained via word of mouth," while another likened it to "trying to build an airplane while you fly it." While reverting



to the legacy model was welcomed by most, it added to the confusion for recruiters who experienced constant change for two years.

It was too much change in a short period of time. It became a cumbersome change management and communication problem. People went through more leaders than they normally would have, and the responsibility of leadership was diluted. Sailors had to work for six different people over the span of a few years.

Another difficulty, related to training during transformation, was “enlisted recruiters being comfortable in their Navy Talent Acquisition Group [model-specific] role but never gained the skills to do everything [whole recruiting process] by themselves.” Another respondent noted that “recruiters during that timeframe were bitter and resentful” while another said, “recruiters have had nothing but obstacles for the last 3 years” and “mental health of recruiters is probably at an all-time low.” The consensus about operating in the legacy model under the Navy Talent Acquisition Group namesake is that it will benefit them in the long run, but it will take some time for the training to catch up as Sailors turn over and re-establish a foothold in their communities.

Top Recommendations to CNRC or CNP

To end the interviews, I asked all interviewees to provide their top three recommendations that they would make to the Commander of Navy Recruiting Command or the Chief of Naval Personnel that would improve their command’s ability to be successful in Fiscal Year 2023 and beyond. Over half of respondents recommended that improving manning and advertising should be top priorities. A command that is manned at 60 percent of their billeted recruiters will always struggle. One respondent said, “you must man Navy Talent Acquisition Groups to 90% or better. Boots on the ground is required to improve the relationship with the public.” Another added, “recruiting and manpower remain a CNO top priority according to long-term goals and strategy, yet it is not reflected by the quality and quantity of Fleet Sailors provided to NRC.” Some respondents recommended a higher advertising budget, commensurate with other services with lower recruiting goals yet higher advertising budgets, while others recommended re-evaluating how the current advertising budget is being executed to ensure it is actually reaching the target market.



Training improvements were another common recommendation amongst respondents. Value Oriented Recruiting (VALOR), the Navy's sales methodology was perceived as inadequate for today's youth population. A respondent recommended the adoption of a more effective sales training methodology to be taught at Navy Recruiting Orientation Unit so that recruiters are "trained to be real salesmen." Another recommended adjusting the Navy Recruiting Orientation Unit training pipeline such that training isn't being led solely by "old school Career Recruiting Force (CRF)] who don't know how to recruit today's youth."

Concurrent with a commonly referenced internal barrier, overhauling the recruiter screening process was recommended. In addition to holding Fleet and Squadrons accountable for failing to properly screen Sailors for recruiting, it was also recommended that Sailors who elect to become recruiters be held accountable as well. One respondent recommended "making it easier [for COs] to remove recruiters who are failing and require that they go back to sea duty rather than an easier shore assignment." Conversely, this respondent also recommended that recruiters should be rewarded for completing arduous shore duty by making 18 months of recruiting duty count toward their next sea duty assignment regardless of where they are stationed in the NRC domain. Another respondent recommended that leadership "let Commanding Officers be Commanding Officers" and trust them to do what is right for their command and their Sailors.

There were several recommendations for processing changes that could help their commands be successful. One recommendation was to reevaluate the policies on shipping weight and marijuana use prior to boot camp. A slightly relaxed shipping weight threshold could limit front-end attrition, with the assumption that a future Sailor will lose weight during boot camp and be within Navy height and weight standards by the time they graduate. Another recommendation was made that the positive Drug and Alcohol Test (POSDAT) policy continue to evolve for marijuana use, especially as more and more states legalize the recreational use of marijuana. The Navy already instituted a temporary policy allowing positive Drug and Alcohol Test applicants to apply for a waiver to enlist as long as 90 days has passed since the failed test however, 90 days is seen as an excessive amount of time especially for applicants who live in states where marijuana is legal. It was



recommended that, like getting into height/weight standards by the end of boot camp, they meet the Navy's standards if they have a clean Drug and Alcohol Test at the end of boot camp.

There were four recommendations that would require additional resources, research, or high level policy change. The first is to reevaluate the ASVAB. Changing the ASVAB would be a monumental task however, it "should be reviewed to see if it is still aligned with current curriculums," especially in the post COVID-19 era. This respondent also recommended that if we continue using the ASVAB "as-is," tying incentive bonuses and promotion guarantees to test scores could be more equitable than tying them to certain rates or contract lengths. "Paying people what they are worth" might bring more people to the table. This respondent also recommended that shorter tour lengths be explored for certain rates, due to "today's generation having a hard time making a four to six year commitment." I quote another respondent below, who suggested hiring subject matter experts at CNRC.

Frankly, the active and retired Career Recruiting Force community is great at managing on-the-bag recruiting at the deck plate level. But they are simply not qualified to run recruiting campaigns at the national level without formal Operations Research, Marketing, or even MBA degrees.

The "college culture" in certain regions of the country leads high schools to put a heavy emphasis on pushing their students to college, and limit access to military recruiters. One respondent recommended that, "senior leaders like the Secretary of the Navy and the Chief of Naval Operations should engage with educational leaders like the Secretary of Education about giving high schools the same credit for a student who chooses the military as they get for a student who chooses to go to college." This recommendation could broadly improve the relationship between Navy recruiting and high schools nationwide, and drastically improve the quality of the applicant pool.

Summary

My study revealed that despite the varying levels of recruiting success in certain areas, everyone struggled in FY22 and continues to do so in FY23. Improper or inadequate manning is a significant problem across the board in both recruiting and support staff roles.



Navy Talent Acquisition Groups are consistently receiving poorly screened recruiters from the Fleet, and the administrative process to remove unfit recruiters is burdensome and overly bureaucratic. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, many high schools, colleges, and universities have been resistant to allow access to recruiters, and many previously established relationships with school officials were lost. The national job market is fiercely competitive, with civilian employer compensation packages and benefits rivalling or surpassing those of the Navy. The current advertising strategy for the Navy is not bleeding down to the target market, and is not strong enough to transcend negative media coverage, whether self-inflicted or stoked by the divisive political environment. Military Health System (MHS) Genesis, designed to be a process improvement, has effectively doubled the recruit processing time experienced by interview participants. Lastly, the Navy Talent Acquisition Group model transformation was a failure. The recruiting enterprise was failing under the new model and had to revert back to legacy operations. The transformation process was rushed, unguided, and exposed training deficiencies across the board. The constant churn from transformation, adapting to recruiting during a pandemic, and reverting back to legacy operations over a two year span took a toll on recruiters and left the recruiting enterprise with a deficit to make up.

Limitations

Due to time constraints and scheduling availability, I was only able to interview a small percentage of recruiting leadership. Navy Talent Acquisition Groups from Navy Recruiting Region West were also underrepresented in this study. Market conditions can vary greatly in different regions of the United States and thus, this study disproportionately accounts for issues facing recruiting operations in Navy Recruiting Region East. While many trends emerged from participants' responses, potentially shedding light on large-scale issues affecting the recruiting enterprise, their expressed views cannot be unequivocally applied to the entire organization.



V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this thesis, I sought to answer two questions, (1) What were the most prominent challenges to achieving Fiscal Year 2022 recruiting goals and what challenges have been presented in Fiscal Year 2023, and (2) What internal and external factors pose the greatest risk to maintaining an all-volunteer force and the continued success of Navy recruiting? Using a qualitative approach, this thesis outlined the structure of Navy recruiting, analyzed available literature to identify factors affecting Navy recruiting, and garnered direct feedback from Navy recruiting leadership via interviews. While there was some overlap and interconnectedness between the issues presented by available literature and the issues provided in the leadership interviews, it was invaluable to have been able to provide a sounding board for the Navy Talent Acquisition Group Commanding Officers to express their thoughts and ideas for how to improve Navy recruiting.

The findings of this thesis reveal that there was an amalgamation of issues and factors, both internal and external that resulted in underlying failure in Fiscal Year 2022 leading into Fiscal Year 2023. Suffice it to say, the decision to push the expedited transformation to the Navy Talent Acquisition Group recruiting model on the remainder of the Navy recruiting enterprise during a global pandemic was a colossal failure. Navy Talent Acquisition Groups who transformed prior to the pandemic had time to prepare, received more adequate training, and the benefit of time to evolve with the new recruiting process, and still underperformed when compared to legacy Navy Recruiting Districts. Injecting confusion into the rest of the recruiting enterprise while they were trying to adapt to recruiting in the pandemic environment created huge disadvantages. As the United States emerged from the pandemic, Navy Talent Acquisition Groups were already behind and trying to catch up while the economy rebounded and made conditions even worse. Economic headwinds combined with depleted high school access, undermanned commands with poorly screened Sailors, negative media coverage, ineffective marketing, and the lowest propensity to serve in 20 years is a recipe for failure.

Based on my research and interview feedback, I recommend the following actions be considered to improve the probability of recruiting success. First, Navy Talent



Acquisition Group manning must be addressed and improved. If Fleet Sailors are a priority and detailing to recruiting duty is an afterthought, I recommend allowing future Sailors to contract directly into the NC(R) rate so the recruiting enterprise can recruit and build its own career recruiting force. These Sailors would not have the Fleet experience that recruiters often draw upon while selling applicants on the Navy however, they can receive extensive sales training as part of their “A” and/or “C” schools just as any new hire for a civilian sales job would. This leads to my second recommendation that the curriculum at Navy Recruiting Orientation Unit be evaluated and adjusted. Curriculum aspects that were applicable 10 years ago may not be applicable anymore. Today’s youth are different and unless the training pipeline for recruiters is updated, the divide between them and recruiters will continue to grow. A continuum of training should also be implemented so that a recruiter doesn’t receive a crash course at the beginning of their 36 month tour and figure out the rest via on-the-job training. Recruiting methods should continue to evolve as conditions evolve and recruiters need to be involved in that process throughout their time on recruiting duty.

Third, the Navy’s advertising budget needs to be reflective of its recruiting goals relative to the other services in the DOD. To that end, an exhaustive market research study should be completed on how to effectively leverage the advertising budget. The Navy has moved almost entirely to digital advertising but as I was told by an interview respondent, “we spent so much money promoting the Navy on Facebook, but Gen Z isn’t on Facebook.” Advertising dollars are wasted if the message is not reaching the target market. While digital advertising and reaching potential recruits is important, a campaign with positive messaging to counteract the negativity of the mainstream media should be endorsed. Leveraging veterans and their experiences as well as current Sailors to create positive headlines should be constant so there are 20 positive headlines for every negative one.

Fourth, in an effort to improve the recruiting duty screening process, there should be more collaboration at the flag level between CNRC and Fleet source communities. While it is an impossible task to predict whether a Sailor will be a successful recruiter or not, a more robust screening process is required. Every interview respondent mentioned failure of the screening process impacting their manning conditions.



Fifth, I would like to echo one respondent's specific recommendation that the Secretary of the Navy collaborate with the Secretary of Education to create incentives for schools who have students who join the Navy. There have been many attempts by Navy recruiting leadership to write letters to school officials expressing the benefits of the Navy with the goal of providing better access for recruiters. These efforts have been effective for some and not for others. If there was a compromise at the national level, it would open many doors for recruiters that were lost after the pandemic or have always been closed based on the nature of the school.

I have identified a multitude of challenges that Navy recruiters have faced over the past 3 years. Addressing the internal and external barriers to recruitment and implementing the recommendations for improvements to the recruiting enterprise will ensure that Navy recruiting is manned, trained, and well-equipped to meet its mission. It is essential that Navy leadership takes action to address these issues in order for Navy recruiting to be successful in Fiscal Year 2023, and beyond.



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APPENDIX A. THESIS INTERVIEW INVITATION

[REDACTED]

Subject: NPS Thesis Interview

Good Afternoon [REDACTED]

BLUF: NPS student seeking NTAG CO interviews for Navy Recruiting Thesis topic.

My name is LCDR Jake Black, and I am a student at the Naval Postgraduate School in the Manpower Systems Analysis curriculum. I am completing a thesis about Navy Recruiting and more specifically, the challenges that the recruiting enterprise faced in FY22 and are still facing in FY23.

I chose this topic because I spent almost five years at NTAG Richmond as an Officer Recruiter and eventually a TAOC OIC before coming out to NPS. I know full well that recruiting is always a challenge, but hearing some DoD leadership go on record stating that FY22 was the most difficult recruiting year since the inception of the All-Volunteer Force left me wondering why?

I am trying to interview as many NTAG CO's as I can to gain insight into the challenges your NTAGs are facing on the front lines. The proposed questions are attached in the word document. My preference would be to conduct a virtual interview via Microsoft Teams or Zoom, but I know your time is valuable so even a brief phone call would be extremely valuable to my research. I look forward to hearing from you and wish you recruiting success as we head into the FMAM period.

V/R,

LCDR Jake Black, PHR
[REDACTED]



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APPENDIX B. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions

Each interview should last 15-20 minutes with each Navy Talent Acquisition Group Commanding Officer and/or Chief Recruiter that agrees to participate.

Interview Questions:

- I. Accession Goals
 1. Did your NTAG meet all assigned goals (Enlisted and Officer) for FY22?
 2. If not, in what areas did you fall short?
 3. Was your goal adjusted during FY22?
 4. What was the status of your DEP pool to begin FY23?
 5. Where do you stand through the first quarter of FY23?

- II. Barriers
 1. What were the three biggest internal barriers that affected your recruiters' ability to achieve their assigned goals?
 2. What were/are the three biggest external barriers that affected or are affecting your recruiters' ability to achieve their assigned goals?
 3. Did local COVID policies in the community or schools affect your recruiters in any way?
 4. Did your MEPS conversion drastically change from FY21 to FY22?
 5. Did the transition to MHS Genesis in 2022 have any effect on your MEPS conversion?

- III. Navy Talent Acquisition Group Transition
 1. When did your district transition to the NTAG model?
 2. Are you still operating under the NTAG/TAOC model as originally designed or did you revert to operating under the traditional recruiting model?
 3. What were the biggest challenges your NTAG faced during and after the transition process?
 4. Do you think the transition affected your ability to make accession goals?

Final Question:

What are the top three recommendations you would make to CNRC or CNP that would improve your command's ability to be successful in FY23 and beyond?

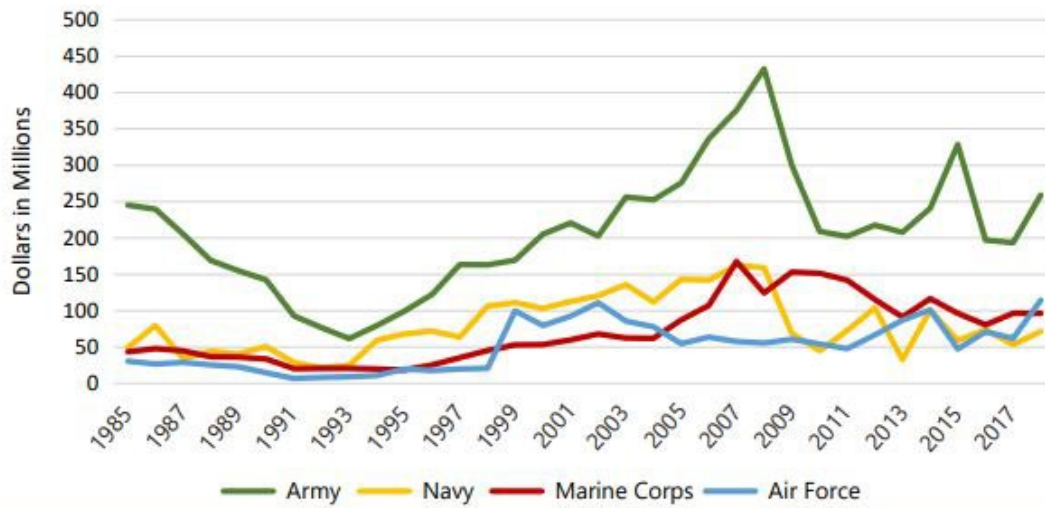


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APPENDIX C. DOD ADVERTISING BUDGET 1985–2018

Figure 15. Advertising expenditures by Service, FY 1985–2018 (in 2018 dollars)



Source: OUSD (AP) [g].

Source: Gilroy et al. (2020)



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