

DACOWITS

Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services



2023 Focus Report



2023 Focus Group Report

Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (DACOWITS)



August 18, 2023

Authors

Sidra Montgomery, Jordan Stangle, Sade Akinbayo, Grace Seamon-Lahiff

Submitted to

Defense Advisory Committee on Women
in the Services (DACOWITS)
4800 Mark Center Drive, Suite 06E22
Alexandria, VA 22350-9000

Project Officer

DACOWITS Executive Staff

Submitted by

Westat Insight
1310 North Courthouse Road
Suite 880
Arlington, VA 22201

Project Director

Sidra Montgomery

Contents

Executive Summary.....	1
Chapter 1. Introduction and Methods.....	1
A. Focus Group Overview.....	1
B. Focus Group Participant Characteristics.....	2
C. Analysis	4
Chapter 2. Recruitment and Retention.....	7
A. Joining the Military	7
B. Factors That Encouraged Joining the Military	11
C. Factors That Discouraged Joining the Military	17
D. Recommendations to Make Young Women More Inclined to Join the Military	23
E. Experience With Recruiters and the Recruitment Process.....	26
F. Military Marketing and Advertising	35
G. Factors That Encourage Retention.....	40
H. Factors That Discourage Retention.....	46
I. Recommendations to Improve Retention in the Military Services.....	51
Chapter 3. Physical Fitness and Body Composition Assessments	55
A. Overview of the Military Services' PFAs and BCAs	55
B. Experience With PFAs	56
C. Preparing for PFAs	64
D. Participant Recommendations Related to PFAs	71
E. BCAs and Standards	72
F. Preparing for the BCA	79
G. Participant Recommendations to Improve BCA Standards and Methods of Measurement.....	82
Chapter 4. Pregnancy and Gender Discrimination	85
A. Experiences With Pregnancy During Military Service and Impact on the Unit	85
B. Pregnancy and Servicewomen's Career Progression.....	91
C. Policies Designed to Support Pregnant Servicewomen.....	101
D. Recommendations to Better Support Servicewomen Who Become Pregnant.....	104
E. Expanded Military Parental Leave Program (MPLP).....	108
F. Prevalence of Gender Discrimination	111
G. Impact of Gender Discrimination.....	119

H. Comfort and confidence in reporting gender discrimination	122
I. Participant Recommendations to Address Gender Discrimination	126
Chapter 5. General Comments	131
A. Biggest Challenges for Women in the Military Today	131
B. Participants' Recommendations for the Secretary of Defense	139
References	145
Appendix A. Installations Visited for 2023 Focus Groups	A-1
Appendix B. 2023 Mini-Survey.....	B-1
Appendix C. 2023 Focus Group Protocols.....	C-1

Tables

Table 1.1. Focus Group Participant Demographics.....	2
Table 3.1. Military Services' Physical Fitness Assessment Components and Body Composition Assessment as of May 2023.....	56
Table 4.1. Overview of Positive and Negative Themes Focus Group Participants' Raised During Discussion on Expansion of Parental Leave Policies in 2023	108

Figures

Figure 1.1. Focus Group Breakdown.....	2
Figure 1.2. Collecting Data Through Structured Focus Group Conversations	5
Figure 1.3. Overview of Analysis Process.....	6
Figure 2.1 Proportion of Participants by Gender Who Would Recommend Military Service to a Young Woman Today	23
Figure 2.2 Factors That Influenced Participants to Stay in Military, by Gender	41
Figure 2.3 Potential Benefits or Policies That Would Most Encourage Service Members to Stay, by Gender	52
Figure 3.1. Percentage of Women and Men Who Report Ever Worrying About Failing a PFA	63
Figure 3.2. Percentage of Women and Men Who Ever Worried About Not Meeting Height and Weight Standards.....	78
Figure 4.1. Proportion of Participants Who Had Been or Had Known Someone Who Was Pregnant During Their Military Service	86
Figure 4.2. Proportion of Participants by Gender and Rank Who Found Planning a Family and Advancing One's Military Career Somewhat or Very Difficult.....	92
Figure 4.3. Proportion of Participants by Gender and Rank Who Agreed or Strongly Agreed That Women in Their Service Who Become Pregnant Are More Likely to Encounter Obstacles Toward Career Advancement	92

Executive Summary

This summary outlines findings from the 2023 Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (DACOWITS) focus groups. DACOWITS collected qualitative and quantitative data during visits in April and May 2023 to eight military installations representing four of the five Department of Defense (DoD) Service branches (Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force; excluding Space Force). Focus groups were held at Fort Bragg (now Fort Liberty), Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point, Camp Lejeune, Fort Benning (now Fort Moore), Moody Air Force Base, Naval Station Norfolk, Naval Air Station Oceana, and Langley Air Force Base. During these focus groups, the Committee addressed three topic sets:

- ▶ Recruitment and retention
- ▶ Physical fitness and body composition assessments
- ▶ Pregnancy and gender discrimination

Chapters 2–4 discuss the findings from each topic set, and chapter 5 provides findings from a general set of questions asked of each focus group, regardless of topic.

Recruitment and Retention

When did participants begin considering joining the military?

Participants began considering military service at various points in their lives. Participants from most groups reported first considering joining the military at one of three points in time: (1) while growing up or before high school, (2) during high school, or (3) after high school following some professional or postsecondary education experience.

How did participants learn about what life would be like in the military?

Before joining, participants learned what life would be like in the military from a variety of sources. The two most common sources were

family members with military experience and media sources, such as television, movies, and social media. Participants also reported not knowing what life would be like in the military prior to joining because they lacked access to individuals with military experience or because they neglected to seek out information about life in the military.

What factors encouraged participants to join the military?

Participants were encouraged to join the military by a variety of factors. Most commonly, participants in most groups were encouraged to join by the benefits and job stability the military offers, and participants received encouragement from family members with and without military experience. Other encouraging factors included perceived travel opportunities and chances to have unique professional experiences, patriotism, and an opportunity to improve their life circumstances.

Participants reported mixed opinions on whether similar or different factors encourage women and men to join the military. Participants in most groups highlighted similar factors that encourage both women and men to join, including benefits, travel opportunities, patriotism, and job training. Less frequently, participants in some groups highlighted factors that may be more encouraging for one gender, such as men being more encouraged to join to experience combat and other physical military activities and women being more encouraged to join by benefits.

What factors discourage individuals from joining the military?

Participants reported numerous factors that could discourage someone from joining the military. Most commonly, participants cited negative societal perceptions of the military and discouragement from family members as factors that discourage joining. Other factors included the impact of military duties on family

life, perceived challenges creating or maintaining a family, and political climate or the possibility of war.

Participants from all groups highlighted factors more likely to discourage women from joining the military, including challenges related to starting and maintaining a family and concerns of sexual assault.

What could the Military Services do to make young women more inclined to join?

The majority of focus group participants reported they would recommend military service to a young woman today, but they also offered recommendations on how their Service could make young women more inclined to join. Most commonly, participants recommended better support for families in the military could make women more inclined to join. Other recommendations included further efforts to mitigate and address instances of sexual assault and expanded strategic marketing efforts to attract women.

What did participants like and dislike about their experience being recruited into the military?

Participants in some groups liked that their recruiter was honest with them, and participants in a few groups liked that their recruiter was personable and shared their own personal military experiences with them. Alternatively, participants from some groups highlighted aspects of the recruiting process they disliked, including how they felt their recruiter had been dishonest with them or had pushed them toward occupational specialties other than those they desired, and how they had frustrating experiences at their Military Entrance Processing Station (MEPS), including feeling unprepared by their recruiter and not receiving the occupational specialty they desired.

What barriers did participants believe might hinder women from joining the military during the recruitment process?

Most commonly, participants cited the lack of female recruiters as a barrier to recruiting more women. Other barriers included unprofessional behavior from male recruiters, policies related to single parent accessions, and fear of sexual assault in the military broadly.

What were participants' recommendations for improving the recruiting process for women?

Participants from most groups recommended improvements to the recruiting process itself. For instance, participants recommended assigning more female recruiters, implementing more opportunities for female recruits to engage with servicewomen before joining, and encouraging recruiters not to push women into combat arms occupational specialties to increase representation. Other recommendations included improvements to marketing strategies to better attract women, such as continuing to produce gender-inclusive marketing materials and featuring the military's benefits and opportunities for job skill development in marketing materials.

How did participants perceive recent recruiting advertisements compared with those they saw before joining the military?

Participants felt recent advertisements were more gender inclusive than the advertising campaigns they saw before joining. However, participants shared mixed opinions on whether recent advertisements accurately portray the military and its mission, with participants in some groups believing current advertisements highlight only the glamorous aspects of military life (e.g., flying a jet, military operations). Participants in some groups felt current advertisements do a better job of highlighting the array of job opportunities offered in the military.

Do participants believe recent recruitment advertisements appeal to both women and men?

Participants held mixed opinions on whether current recruitment advertisements appeal to both women and men. Participants in most groups felt their Service's recent advertisements appeal to both women and men because they are more gender inclusive and feature more occupational specialties than previous advertisements. However, participants from some groups indicated recent advertisements are more appealing to men, emphasizing women are still underrepresented, and advertisements still focus on combat occupational specialties over other occupational specialties.

What factors might encourage participants, or someone like them, to stay in the military beyond their current service obligation?

Participants in most groups indicated that benefits such as educational, housing, medical, and retirement encourage them to stay in the military. However, participants also highlighted ways their Service could positively influence retention, including more opportunities for geographic stability and greater support for creating and maintaining families.

Participants reported mixed opinions on whether the factors that encourage women and men to stay in the military are similar or different. Most commonly, participants highlighted factors more likely to encourage one gender to stay in the military. For example, the male-dominated environment and military culture influenced men to stay in the military, and the benefits and access to child care influenced women, especially single parents, to stay in the military. Alternatively, participants also stressed increased pay would improve retention for both women and men.

What factors might discourage participants, or someone like them, from staying in the military beyond their current service obligation?

Most commonly, participants in most groups indicated conflicts between work and family responsibilities discourage Service members from staying in the military. Other factors that discourage retention mentioned by some groups include toxic leadership and limited access to reproductive health services.

Participants reported mixed opinions on whether the factors that discourage women and men from staying in the military are similar or different. Participants in most groups highlighted factors more likely to discourage women from staying in, including women being more likely to be discouraged by current body composition assessment standards, lack of female representation, limited access to reproductive health services, fear of sexual assault, gender discrimination, and challenges balancing the needs of the family with the needs of the military. Participants did not pinpoint any factors more likely to discourage men from staying in the military.

What could the Services do to retain participants or someone like them?

Participants highlighted several ways their Service could increase their desire to stay in the military, including improved benefits, such as increased pay, and greater access to child care. Other recommendations included improving leadership, increasing opportunities for geographic stability, hiring and investing in better military doctors, adjusted body composition standards, providing more mental health support, offering more remote working opportunities, and increasing support for single parents and dual-military families.

What were participants' recommendations to improve the retention of servicewomen?

Most commonly, participants recommended their Service make it easier for servicewomen to create and maintain a family. Other recommendations to improve the retention of women included greater efforts to address sexism and gender discrimination, more research to better understand what would influence women to stay, and improved leadership.

Physical Fitness and Body Composition Assessments

Did participants believe their Service's physical fitness assessment (PFA) properly measured their fitness levels?

Participants held mixed opinions on whether their PFA properly measures their fitness levels. Participants in most groups reported their Service's PFA does not properly measure fitness levels because it does not consider job responsibilities or duties, does not measure the full range of physical strength, and is conducted infrequently. Less commonly, participants in half the groups felt their Service's PFA does properly measure fitness levels.

Did participants perceive some PFA events to be more challenging for women or men?

Participants indicated upper body and strength components of their Service's PFA could be more challenging for women, including pushups, pullups, and other upper body exercises. The run and abdominal strength events were also highlighted as components that may be more challenging for women. Although these components were described as more challenging for women, participants acknowledged that the upper body exercise components and the run were also challenging for men.

What impact did participants perceive PFA performance had on Service members' careers?

Participants in most groups reported PFA performance can affect opportunities for

promotion because PFA performance is considered by promotion and selection boards. Participants also shared that poor PFA performance can restrict a Service member's eligibility for promotion and pursuit of school assignments, job placements, special programs, and training assignments.

Participants in some groups indicated the impact of PFA performance on a Service member's career may depend on several factors, including their occupational specialty, rank, and the selection board. Most commonly, participants in most groups indicated poor PFA performance negatively affects how Service members are perceived by leaders and others in their unit. However, participants in most groups felt PFA performance does not affect women's and men's career progression differently.

What impact did participants perceive PFA failure had on Service members' careers?

Participants highlighted a variety of repercussions that could occur after failing a PFA, including enrollment in a physical fitness conditioning program or separation from the Service if several PFA failures occur. Participants also indicated repercussions of a failed PFA may depend on the discretion of a Service member's unit or command leadership.

How did participants prepare for the PFA?

Participants began preparing for their next PFA within various timeframes, ranging from consistent year-round preparation to only beginning to prepare when they received notice of their next PFA. Most commonly, participants in most groups reported training for the PFA individually by following their unit's physical fitness plan or using resources their unit provided them. However, participants in nearly half the groups cited challenges accessing resources to prepare for the PFA, including limited gym hours on base. Other preparation strategies included adjusting their usual workout routine to train for specific components of the PFA and adjusting their eating habits.

Did participants feel women and men prepared similarly or differently for the PFA?

Most commonly, participants in the majority of groups reported women and men prepare similarly for the PFA. However, participants in most groups felt preparation for the PFA is more likely to vary by individual, rather than gender. Less frequently, participants in some groups described how women and men may prepare differently for the PFA, including women having to begin preparing earlier or training harder for the PFA.

What resources did participants highlight as being available to them to prepare for the PFA?

Participants described having access to at least one of the following resources to support preparation for the PFA: fitness coaches and trainers, gym equipment, nutritionists and other nutritional resources, and fitness programs or classes.

Participants also highlighted additional resources they wish their Service provided to support preparation for the PFA or to maintain their general health and fitness. These resources included expanded gym hours and fitness classes, better access to personal trainers, and more nutrition education.

What recommendations did participants make about their Service's PFA?

Participants in all groups provided recommendations to improve their Service's PFA. Recommendations related to PFA standards included less frequent changing of standards and PFA components, better training for PFA graders on how to appropriately grade components of the PFA, and more robust accommodations or adjustments of PFA standards for servicewomen following a birth event or all Service members after injuries.

Participants also provided recommendations on PFA components, frequency, and repercussions, including adding more alternate cardio events or components more aligned with job capabilities, having dedicated time for training

during the workday, not including fitness reports in records available to promotion and selection boards, making the PFA a pass/fail assessment, testing more frequently, and allowing Service members to skip a test if they performed to a certain standard on a previous test.

How were participants assessed for body composition?

Participants indicated body composition is assessed manually using weight scales and taping instruments to measure the circumference of certain body regions. Participants in some groups highlighted that women and men are taped differently in their Service, with men being taped at two body sites (neck and waist), while women are taped at an additional third body site (around their hips).

Most commonly, participants in most groups indicated their body composition was measured publicly in front of other Service members. However, participants in some groups indicated the body composition assessment (BCA) should be conducted privately.

Did participants believe BCA standards and forms of measurement are useful?

Most commonly, participants in most groups felt BCA standards and approaches to measurement were not useful and questioned the purpose of the BCA. Participants felt BCA standards and measurement approaches were inaccurate, ineffective, and unrealistic. These participants questioned whether the standards helped assess the readiness, health, and professional appearance of Service members. Alternatively, participants in some groups felt their Service's BCA standards and measurement approaches were useful for gauging and assessing Service members' health.

What impacts did participants perceive BCA results could have on career progression?

Participants indicated BCA failure could have a negative impact on a Service member's career. Specifically, participants highlighted that BCA failure could affect career progression by

limiting reenlistment, promotion, and special training opportunities.

Did participants believe BCA failures had similar or different effects on the career progression of women and men?

Participants in most groups indicated BCA failure would have the same effect on the careers of women and men. However, participants in most groups felt it was more difficult for women to meet BCA standards for various reasons. For example, the BCA does not account for the impacts of pregnancy, and women have more natural body fat than men.

How did participants prepare for the BCA?

Most commonly, participants in most groups changed or more closely monitored their eating habits to prepare for the BCA, including implementing unhealthy dieting measures, such as crash dieting or starving themselves leading up to the assessment. Participants highlighted a variety of other unhealthy methods Service members use to prepare for their BCA, including using abdominal wraps, taking weight loss pills, and going to the sauna excessively to lose weight quickly.

What resources did participants highlight as being available to them to prepare for the PFA?

Resources cited by participants included fitness instructors and nutritional resources. Participants indicated that, regardless of the resources available in their unit to help them prepare for the BCA, individual Service members were still responsible for accessing and using these resources. Whereas participants in some groups reported the availability of resources and support to prepare for the BCA depends on the unit, participants also indicated some resources are difficult to access.

What recommendations did participants make about BCA standards or measurement practices?

Participants described four primary recommendations to improve BCA standards or measurement practices, including reevaluate and update BCA standards, use technology to more accurately assess body composition, provide more guidance and resources to support BCA preparation, and train personnel on how to tape Service members properly.

Pregnancy and Gender Discrimination

What did participants perceive as the biggest challenges pregnant servicewomen face in the military?

Participants from most groups reported that pregnant servicewomen were treated as less competent, more fragile, and less valuable to the mission than nonpregnant servicewomen. Participants in about half the groups felt pregnant servicewomen were stigmatized in the military; for example, by being ostracized within the unit and treated differently by leaders and peers.

How did participants describe the impact of a servicewoman becoming pregnant on their units?

Participants in most groups indicated that pregnancy can negatively affect unit staffing and personnel assignment, while women in some groups described feeling as though they were a burden on their unit after becoming pregnant. Participants in about half the groups indicated the impact of pregnancy on a unit would likely depend on the career field, rank, or position of the servicewoman who became pregnant and unit leadership's approach to staffing gaps that result from pregnancy and parental leave.

How did participants believe pregnancy could affect a servicewoman's career progression?

Participants highlighted various factors that could inhibit pregnant servicewomen from advancing in their career, including being removed from skilled or operational work during their pregnancy and the impact of parental leave on performance evaluations and future promotions after the pregnancy. Additional factors that may inhibit postpartum servicewomen include having to choose between military and family responsibilities, policies related to PFA and BCA standards, and child care barriers. However, participants in some groups suggested the impact of pregnancy on a servicewoman's career might depend on their career field, rank, or the timing of the pregnancy.

Were participants aware of any policies and practices designed to support the career progression of pregnant servicewomen?

Participants in most groups could identify a policy, regulation, or practice that supported pregnant servicewomen; however, participants in more than half the groups also reported confusion about the details or requirements associated with those policies. Participants in some groups also noted current policies to support pregnant servicewomen are not sufficient; for example, they cited the negative impact of time away on parental leave on promotions and performance evaluations.

Specifically, when asked, participants were generally unaware of DoD's 2020 discrimination policy update to include pregnancy as a form of prohibited discrimination in the military. However, many participants believed pregnancy discrimination was already prohibited in the military prior to this policy update.

Participants from some groups recommended policy changes to better address the impact of pregnancy on servicewomen's career progression, including increased funding for and access to lactation rooms and improved access to reproductive healthcare services and obstetrician-gynecologist care.

How did participants feel about the expanded Military Parental Leave Program policies DoD instituted in 2023?

Participants in most groups highlighted both positive and negative aspects of this policy change. Positive themes included the expanded program accounts for difficult birth experiences for women, helps support families, and facilitates more equality in caregiving. Male participants appreciated being given the opportunity to bond with their children. Alternatively, negative themes about the expanded program included beliefs that the length of leave could hinder career progression, that longer parental leave may negatively affect unit readiness and staffing, and that servicemen may fear pushback from unit leadership if they take the full length of leave.

Did participants consider gender discrimination to be an issue in their Service?

Participants in most groups considered gender discrimination to be a problem in their Service, though women were more likely than men to provide this response. Participants highlighted a variety of examples of gender discrimination in their Service, including negative cultural perceptions of servicewomen and covert behaviors, such as some jobs being designated as "women's work." Participants also described leaders or peers comparing women with one another and engaging in microaggressions toward servicewomen. Participants also raised overt behaviors of gender discrimination, such as excluding servicewomen from important career opportunities and making prejudicial comments about servicewomen.

Participants in most groups felt gender discrimination was more likely to occur in some occupational specialties than others, such as combat arms. However, participants in some groups reported gender discrimination was becoming less of a problem in their Service.

How did participants believe gender discrimination affects servicewomen's career progression?

Participants in most groups reported gender discrimination would affect unit cohesion, morale, and readiness, but they suggested leaders play a significant role in determining how much gender discrimination affects an individual or their career. For example, participants highlighted that leaders are responsible for coordinating Service members' performance evaluations, personnel assignments, and training assignments, all of which can affect opportunities for career progression. Participants in some groups reported gender discrimination personally discourages Service members who experience it, which can negatively affect their sense of self, their career, and their retention in the military.

How comfortable were participants discussing issues of gender discrimination with leadership?

Participants in most groups felt comfortable discussing issues of gender discrimination with their leadership, though comfort with discussing these topics depended on current leadership and command climate for participants in about half the groups. Alternatively, participants in some groups felt uncomfortable discussing issues of gender discrimination with leadership for various reasons, including concerns they would not be taken seriously, confusion over the types of behaviors considered to be gender discrimination, and fear or previous experience of backlash for bringing up topics of gender discrimination.

Were participants confident their leadership would address issues of gender discrimination?

Participants in about half the groups were confident their leadership would address issues of gender discrimination, and some of these beliefs were based on previous experiences in which leadership handled issues related to

gender discrimination well. However, participants in most groups also indicated their confidence in whether issues of gender discrimination would be handled appropriately by leadership depended on the gender discrimination situation itself or their leadership.

Alternatively, participants in about half the groups were not confident their leadership would address issues of gender discrimination for a few reasons, including discrimination not being a priority for leaders, concerns that leaders would not take gender discrimination concerns seriously, or a lack of comfort related to discussing or addressing gender discrimination issues.

What recommendations did participants have to prevent or address gender discrimination in their Service?

Most commonly, participants in half the groups recommended improving current equal opportunity training, including making the training mandatory and more interactive, and incorporating lessons on implicit bias, stereotypes, and privilege. Additional recommendations included focusing on leadership, such as creating a soft skills training to teach Service members how to address difficult topics empathically, and bolstering the equal opportunity complaint process. Male participants in some groups also recommended consolidating and marketing currently available resources available to address gender discrimination.

General Comments

What did participants raise as the biggest challenges facing servicewomen today?

Most commonly, participants in nearly half the groups reported pregnancy as the biggest challenge servicewomen face today for a variety of reasons, including its impact on career progression and access to key operational

milestones or training opportunities and the stigma of being pregnant in the military.

Participants in nearly half the groups felt balancing military responsibilities and family life was another major challenge servicewomen face today, with many participants describing servicewomen as having to make a choice between military responsibilities and participation in family life.

Participants cited additional themes as the major challenges facing servicewomen, including sexism, child care, the threat of sexual harassment and assault, and how the military handles those situations.

What were participants' recommendations for the Secretary of Defense?

Participants provided a diverse set of recommendations for the Secretary of Defense, including improving the availability and affordability of child care, increasing pay for all personnel, reducing the prevalence of sexual harassment and sexual assault in the military, and improving fertility and reproductive health benefits and access to care. Men were more likely than women to recommend increasing pay, while women were more likely to recommend increasing access to child care, reducing sexual harassment and assault, and increasing access to reproductive healthcare services.

Chapter 1. Introduction and Methods

This report outlines the findings from the 2023 Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (DACOWITS) focus groups. Chapter 1 provides the introduction and methods, which consist of an overview of the focus groups, the characteristics of the focus group participants, and the analysis approach. Chapters 2 through 5 present the findings on recruitment and retention, physical fitness and body composition assessments, pregnancy and gender discrimination, and general focus group comments, respectively.

A. Focus Group Overview

DACOWITS collected qualitative and quantitative data during site visits in April and May 2023 to eight military installations¹ representing four of the five U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) Service branches (Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force, excluding Space Force; see Appendix A). During the focus groups at these sites, the Committee addressed three topic sets:

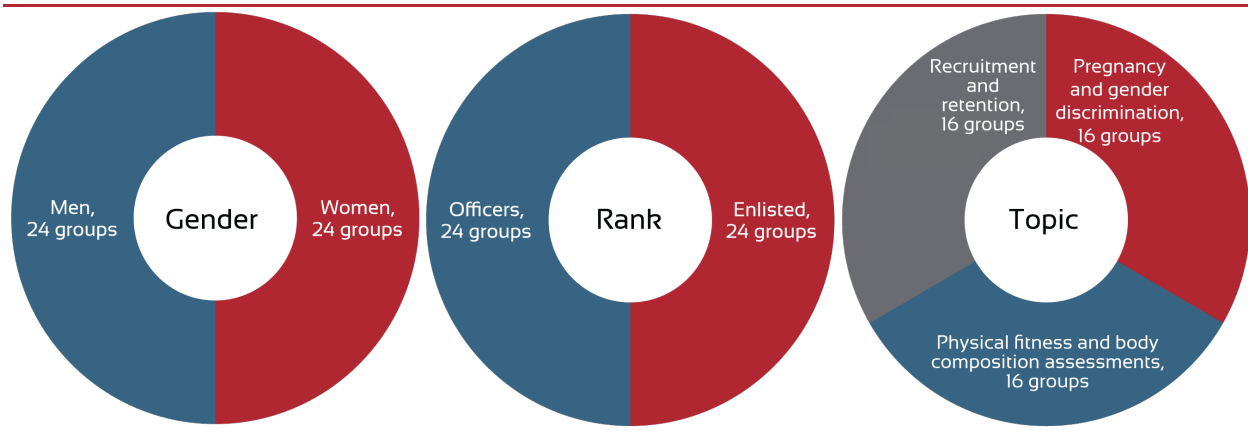
- ▶ Recruitment and retention
- ▶ Physical fitness and body composition assessments
- ▶ Pregnancy and gender discrimination

In partnership with the DACOWITS research contractors, the Committee developed a mini-survey (see Appendix B) and a series of focus group protocols (see Appendix C). Each protocol consisted of one of the three topic sets to ensure each study topic was addressed by each Service, gender, and pay grade group. Each focus group lasted 90 minutes. Committee members facilitated focus group discussions to elicit and assess the views, attitudes, and experiences of Service members regarding the selected study topics. The Committee also distributed mini-surveys to the participants to determine the demographic composition of the groups and ask supplemental questions related to each study topic. Mini-survey findings are presented throughout the report including full results in Appendix B.1. All the data collection instruments were reviewed and approved by the Office of Management and Budget (Control No. 0704-0656) and considered exempt from institutional review board requirements by the Defense Human Resources Activity Component Office of Human Research Protection.

DACOWITS conducted 48 focus groups in 2023. Of the 48 groups, 24 were held with men, and 24 were held with women. Twenty-four of the groups were conducted with enlisted personnel (pay grades E3–E8), and 24 were held with officers (pay grades O1–O5 and W1–W5). There were 481 participants with an average of 10 participants per session. DACOWITS addressed the topic of recruitment and retention in 16 groups, physical fitness and body composition assessments in 16 groups, and pregnancy and gender discrimination in 16 groups. Each installation was responsible for recruiting focus group participants from the demographic categories specified by DACOWITS (see Figure 1.1).

¹ The eight installations were Fort Bragg (now Fort Liberty), Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point, Camp Lejeune, Fort Benning (now Fort Moore), Moody Air Force Base, Naval Station Norfolk, Naval Air Station Oceana, and Langley Air Force Base.

Figure 1.1. Focus Group Breakdown



B. Focus Group Participant Characteristics

The research team analyzed the qualitative data from the focus groups and compiled a demographic profile of the focus group participants using responses from the mini-surveys (see Table 1.1). Half the participants were men and half were women. Four Services—the Army (22 percent), Navy (25 percent), Marine Corps (27 percent), and Air Force (25 percent)—were closely represented. Nearly all participants (99 percent) were Active Duty. Participants ranged widely in age, from 18 to 50 and older. Participants in the youngest age category (aged 17–20) and two oldest age categories (aged 45–49 and 50 or older) made up smaller percentages of the overall group.

Enlisted personnel represented slightly more than half of focus group participants (51 percent): Service members with pay grades E4–E6 made up the largest proportion of enlisted personnel (34 percent), followed by those with pay grades E7–E9 (10 percent) and E1–E3 (8 percent). The largest subset of officers was composed of those with pay grades O1–O3 (33 percent), followed by those with pay grades of O4 or higher (10 percent) and WO1–WO3 (4 percent) and WO4–WO5 (2 percent).

Focus group participants represented varying levels of tenure in the Military Services. Those with 20 or more years of service (9 percent) were least represented, whereas those with 3–5 years (21 percent) and 6–9 years (22 percent) of tenure were most represented. The remaining tenures were nearly equally represented (15 to 17 percent). A majority of participants identified as White (68 percent); smaller proportions identified as Black (20 percent), Asian (5 percent), American Indian or Alaska Native (1 percent), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (less than 1 percent), or multiple races (6 percent). About 18 percent of participants identified as Hispanic. Subsequent chapters in this report provide the results for the study topic-specific mini-survey questions.

Table 1.1. Focus Group Participant Demographics

Participant Characteristic	Percentage of Women (<i>n</i> = 239)	Percentage of Men (<i>n</i> = 241)	Percentage of All Participants (<i>n</i> = 481)
Gender			
Missing	0	0	1*
Total	49.8	50.2	100.0

Participant Characteristic	Percentage of Women (<i>n</i> = 239)	Percentage of Men (<i>n</i> = 241)	Percentage of All Participants (<i>n</i> = 481)
Service Branch			
Army	23.8	20.7	22.2
Navy	23.8	25.7	24.9
Marine Corps	27.2	27.8	27.4
Air Force	25.1	25.7	25.4
Missing	-	-	-
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
National Guard or Reserves			
Yes	0.4	0.0	.2
No	99.6	100.0	99.8
Missing	-	-	-
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Age			
17–20	3.3	5.4	4.4
21–24	19.7	12.9	16.2
25–29	28.9	32.4	30.8
30–34	22.6	17.8	20.2
35–39	17.6	19.1	18.3
40–44	6.3	8.7	7.5
45–49	0.8	2.5	1.7
50 or older	0.8	1.2	1.0
Missing	-	-	-
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Pay Grade			
E1–E3	6.7	8.3	7.7
E4–E6	33.5	33.8	33.5
E7–E9	10.9	9.2	10.0
O1–O3	31.8	33.3	32.5
O4 or higher	12.6	8.3	10.4
W01–W03	2.9	5.0	4.0
W04–W05	1.7	2.1	1.9
Missing	-	-	-
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Length of Military Service			
Less than 3 years	16.0	14.2	15.2
3–5 years	19.7	21.3	20.5
6–9 years	21.4	22.1	21.7
10–14 years	18.9	14.2	16.5
15–19 years	16.0	17.9	16.9
20 years or more	8.0	10.4	9.2
Missing	-	-	-
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Participant Characteristic	Percentage of Women (n = 239)	Percentage of Men (n = 241)	Percentage of All Participants (n = 481)
Race			
Asian	5.7	3.4	4.6
Black	20.6	20.3	20.4
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.9	0.4	0.7
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.4	0.4	0.4
White	65.8	70.7	68.3
Multiple races	6.6	4.7	5.6
Missing	-	-	-
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Spanish/Hispanic/Latino Ethnicity (Mexican, Mexican-American, Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban, or other Spanish/Hispanic/Latino)			
Yes	21.6	14.3	17.9
No	78.4	85.7	82.1
Missing	-	-	-
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Relationship Status			
Divorced	11.3	7.5	9.4
Married to a civilian or veteran	14.2	52.3	33.5
Married to a current Service member	40.2	5.4	22.7
Never married	31.0	33.6	32.2
Separated	3.3	1.2	2.3
Missing	-	-	-
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Dependent Children			
Yes, at home	48.5	42.7	45.5
Yes, not at home	0.8	4.1	2.5
No	50.6	53.1	52.0
Missing	-	-	-
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Note: Some percentages do not sum to 100 because of rounding.

*One participant did not select a gender. This participant's responses are included in the "all participants" column.

Source: DACOWITS mini-survey (data from all groups)

C. Analysis

The focus group analysis process involved several steps. During each focus group, research staff captured verbatim discussions between focus group participants and Committee facilitators; the research team cleaned and redacted the transcripts to remove identifiers from participants' quotes. Next, the team identified themes and subthemes by reviewing all transcripts for a given focus group topic and noting common responses that arose. Once the themes were identified, the data were entered into qualitative analysis software (NVivo 12), and the transcripts were coded by themes. This enabled the research team to explore whether certain responses were more common among subgroups (e.g., gender, pay grade, Service). Unless otherwise specified, focus group themes were common across

pay grades, Military Services, and genders. The quotes provided throughout the report were chosen from hundreds of illustrative examples to exemplify the findings for each theme.

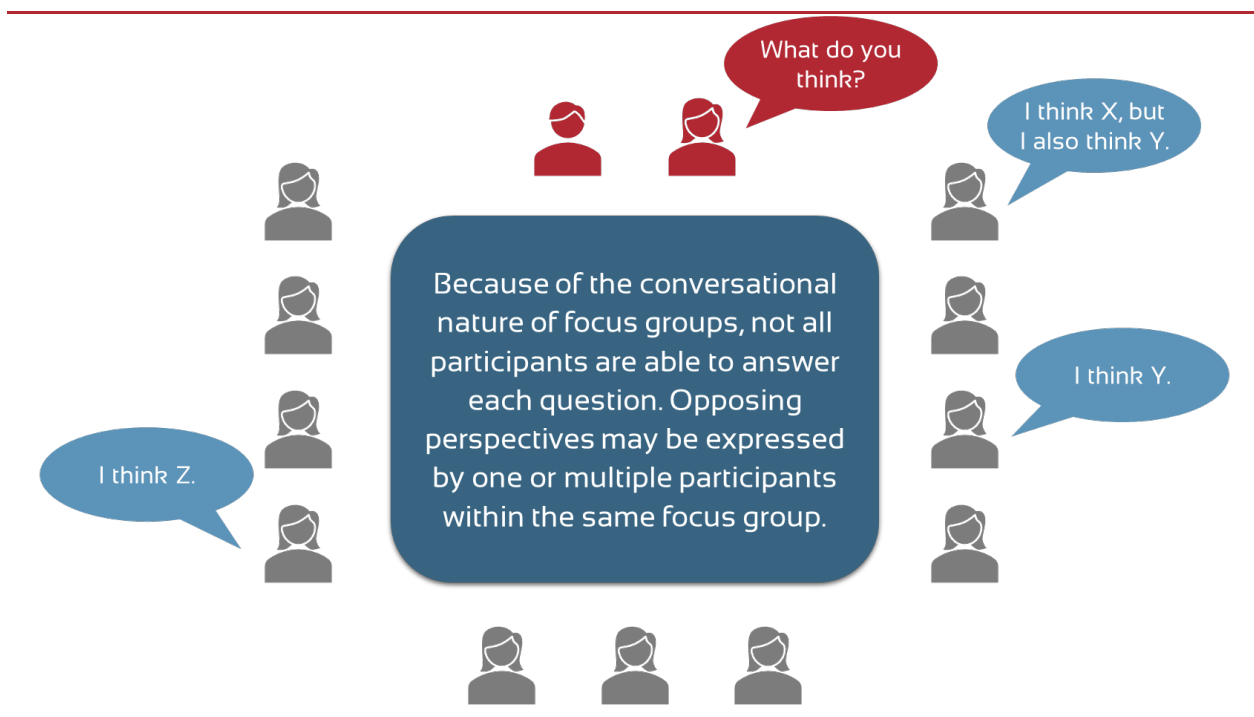
1. Strengths and limitations of focus groups as a methodology

Focus groups are a key tool for DACOWITS to gauge Service members' perceptions and assess their knowledge, attitudes, and opinions. They provide an interactive way to explore topics deeply and obtain detailed information in Service members' own words. Focus groups also help researchers collect data on groups that are underrepresented in the military, such as women, that may not be represented statistically through surveys that examine the military as a whole.

Unlike survey research (e.g., the DACOWITS mini-survey), which gathers information on the numbers or proportions of respondents who answer particular questions in a certain way, focus group research does not gather information on concurrence across all respondents, and findings are not generalizable to a larger population. The recruitment of participants for a focus group cannot be replicated; it is difficult to ensure identical questions are asked in each group, and the results for one group cannot be compared precisely with those for other groups. Despite these limitations, the results can add greatly to an existing body of knowledge on a topic, or they can serve as a first step toward developing a more statistical study of a new topic.

As a result of the small sample size, the groups might not represent the larger population accurately; this effect can sometimes be beneficial if the desire is to obtain data from underrepresented groups that may not be represented statistically through surveys and other means. Group discussions can be difficult to direct and control, and many subjects are addressed during each discussion; as a result, not all questions are asked in all the groups, and not all participants are able to answer each question (see Figure 1.2).

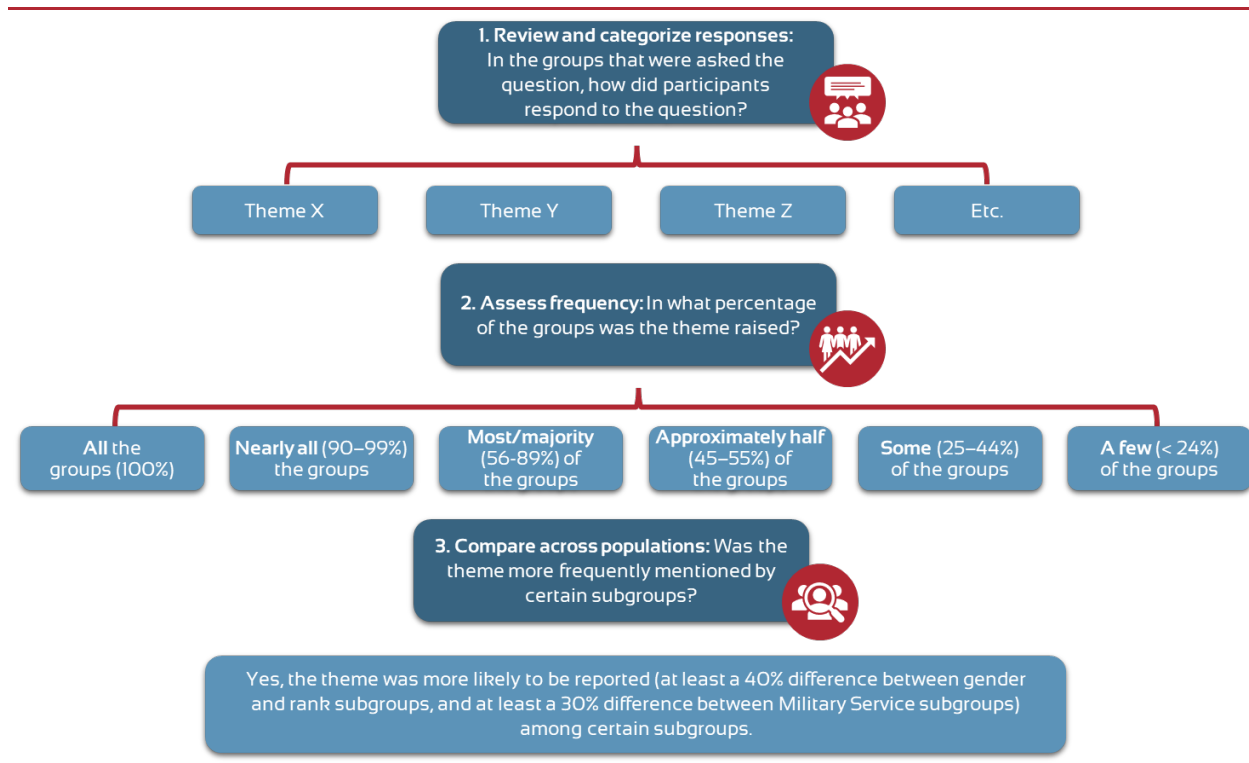
Figure 1.2. Collecting Data Through Structured Focus Group Conversations



To give a rough indication of the frequency with which a particular theme was mentioned, several key terms and phrases are used throughout the report. For example, to indicate how frequently a theme was raised during the focus groups that addressed a specific topic and in response to a particular question that was asked, the report uses “all” for themes that emerged in all the groups in which the question was asked; “nearly all” for themes in 90–99 percent of the groups; “most” or “majority” for themes in 56–89 percent of the groups; “approximately half” for themes in 45–55 percent of the groups; and “some” for themes in 25–44 percent of the groups. To ensure the report focuses on the most commonly reported themes rather than those that emerged in only a few groups, aside from lists of participant suggestions, this report typically does not include themes that emerged in fewer than 25 percent of the groups in which a particular question was asked. However, in a handful of instances, the report uses the term “a few” for themes that emerged in fewer than 25 percent of groups in which the question was asked.

When comparing multiple responses for a given question, the report uses phrases that give a rough sense of the proportion of participants who expressed a given opinion—such as “nearly all the participants who responded to this question” or “the most commonly mentioned theme”—rather than phrases with a fixed meaning that imply every participant provided a response. When comparing whether the theme was more frequently mentioned by certain subgroups (e.g., men, women, officers, enlisted personnel, members of one Service), the report uses the term “more likely than” to identify a theme that was mentioned at least 40 percent more often by one gender or rank and at least 30 percent more often by members of one Service. It is important to keep in mind that the purpose of focus groups is to obtain rich detail on a topic rather than to precisely measure the frequency and types of responses. An overview of the analysis structure is outlined in Figure 1.3.

Figure 1.3. Overview of Analysis Process



Chapter 2. Recruitment and Retention

DACOWITS investigated factors that influenced Service members' decisions to join the military over other professional or educational opportunities and remain in the military beyond their initial service obligations. The Committee was interested in learning about factors that encouraged and discouraged Service members from joining the military, including how Service members learned about life in the military, their experience with recruiters and the recruitment process, and marketing and advertising. The Committee was also interested in factors that could improve the retention of Service members, including specific factors for servicewomen. This investigation continued DACOWITS' previous research on recruitment, marketing strategies, and retention.

The Committee conducted 16 focus groups with both enlisted Service members (E3–E8) and officers (O1–O5/W1–W5) on the topic of recruitment and retention (see Appendix C.1 for the focus group protocol). This chapter discusses the focus group findings on recruitment and retention and is organized according to the following sections:

- ▶ Joining the military
- ▶ Factors that encouraged joining the military
- ▶ Factors that discouraged joining the military
- ▶ Recommendations to make young women more inclined to join the military
- ▶ Experience with recruiters and the recruitment process
- ▶ Military marketing and advertising
- ▶ Factors that encourage and discourage retention
- ▶ Recommendations to improve retention in the Military Services

When interpreting the findings outlined in this chapter, consider that these focus groups consisted only of participants who had joined the military. It is possible that individuals who did not join the military would provide different perspectives on these topics.

A. Joining the Military

DACOWITS asked focus group participants when they first began to consider joining the military and how they learned about what life would be like in the military. Participants mentioned first considering joining the military at various points in their lives, including before, during, and after high school. Some participants decided to join after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. Participants reported learning what military life would be like from various sources, including family members, friends, and media sources, while other participants reported not learning about what life in the military would be like before joining.

1. Participants first considered military service at various points in their lives

Participants shared a range of timeframes when they first considered joining the military, including childhood, around high school, and after working or pursuing higher education.

Participants in most groups began considering military service before high school, often as a result of growing up with family who had served, which influenced them to consider joining early in life. Officers

were more likely than enlisted personnel and participants from one Service were more likely to provide this response.

I grew up in a [Service] family, so probably watching my dad as a 5-, 6-, or 7-year-old is what inspired me to join the family business.

—Male Officer

I went to the [Military Service Academy] and planned it out since I was 12.

—Female Officer

My sister and brother are part of the [Service]. They were role models to me, and I always wanted to go into the armed services but didn't have the guts. But my brother-in-law is a recruiter, which helped.

—Enlisted Woman

Probably as a kid growing up in a military family. I waited a little after school to join and pulled the trigger around like, 25.

—Male Officer

Participants in most groups began considering military service during high school, often as a result of interacting with a recruiter at their school or influence from family members.

For me, it was high school when the recruiters came around. This recruiter was talkative; you know like they are. We started having more and more conversations. It seemed interesting. I've had some family serve as well.

—Enlisted Woman

Junior year of high school after my sister joined. I saw her, and I said, this is awesome! I was going to join junior year, but my dad said no, and so I joined senior year.

—Enlisted Woman

Senior year of high school. I was an athlete with good grades and decided to join [Military Service Academy] football team.

—Male Officer

I did Civil Air Patrol in high school, and that enticed me to join, and then I took a break from work after high school. I had a kid, and my wife called the recruiter for me.

—Enlisted Man

Participants in most groups began considering military service after high school, often after obtaining work experience or spending time in college.

I am one of those that chose to serve later in life. I was 29 when I came in. I think about when I was younger, I wasn't in the right frame of mind to join. It took me learning myself and living a bit to decide to join. Almost every generation of my family has served since, well, the beginning of America. When it came to this generation, mine, nobody joined. I felt the need to carry the torch.

—Enlisted Woman

I was in college for a little bit, and I had a friend who was a [Service] recruiter who went to CrossFit with me, and me and my mom were talking because college wasn't working out. I had been there too long and partying, and my parents are retired [Service members] ...

—Enlisted Woman

I was in an intense engineering program in college. I was burned out, and the [military] surge was going on. I wanted to do something else.

—Enlisted Man

I started thinking it halfway through college. Track wasn't working for me, and I was looking for a new way to get back into school and get paid for it. I didn't have many other options or ways to go.

—Female Officer

2. Participants in some groups began considering military service because of September 11, 2001

Participants cited being influenced to consider military service because of the terrorist attacks that took place on September 11, 2001.

For me, a lot has to do with 9/11. I graduated from college and wanted to go into medicine. This was your generation to serve, and at that time, it was your obligation to do that, and it clicked with me, and here I am. I had no desire to join before that.

—Female Officer

After 9/11, I didn't know I wanted to join the [Service], but I knew I was going to join the Services.

—Enlisted Man

Mine was easy; I joined because of 9/11, so it's an easy answer.

—Enlisted Man

3. Participants learned about what life would be like in the military from a variety of sources

Participants in most groups reported not knowing what to expect of life in the military prior to joining, while other participants reported learning about what life would be like in the military from a variety of sources, including family members, media sources, and friends.

a. Participants in most groups did not know about life in the military before joining

Participants in most groups were unaware of what life in the military would be like prior to joining the military. Participants reported not seeking out information about military life prior to joining. Some lacked family members or friends with military experience to learn from. Others learned about military life during their initial entry training process.

I had no knowledge of anything until boot camp and was super motivated.

—Enlisted Woman

I didn't know until I got in; I figured it out as I went.

—Enlisted Man

I had no one in my family that was ever military, and I guess I learned at basic [training] and then from basic [training] to [my next training] school, but I had no knowledge of what the military was like. My brother talked about joining the [Service], but my parents shut that down, so I learned just being in it.

—Enlisted Woman

I don't know if I thought about it or cared. I just joined and would figure it out when I got there.

—Enlisted Man

b. Participants in most groups learned about life in the military from family members

Family members who were currently serving or had previously served in the military were a major source of information for participants about what life was like in the military.

I have a bachelor's [degree] in anthropology. I've always been interested in civil affairs. ... My dad was an E5, an MI [military intelligence] guy. He was in the military in the 1990s, [so] I got that style of military growing up. He talked about all the fun he got to see, tanks maneuvering. ... When I got armor, I got to actually do it! People get to watch me do it and have fun....

—Female Officer

It was different for me as a new mom. I left my child at 7 months old to go to boot camp. I was familiar with the [Service] because my in-laws were [Service members], but it was different being a mom and leaving to join.

—Enlisted Woman

Both my parents served in the [Service], so I kind of had an idea of what military life would be like.

—Enlisted Man

My father was military as well, so I knew from his stories.

—Enlisted Man

c. Participants in most groups learned about life in the military from media sources

Participants learned about what life would be like in the military from a variety of media sources, including television shows and movies, and from online resources, including social media where Service members shared their firsthand experiences. Men were more likely than women to provide this response.

I watched a lot of YouTube of people's daily lives in the military and got a good feel for it.

—Male Officer

I had to Google everything, I didn't have family or friends who were in. I didn't trust the recruiters. I had to Google and YouTube it because they didn't have an accurate description of the [Service].

—Female Officer

My experience was from TV shows and movies. I was the first one in my family to serve.

—Enlisted Man

I used websites and Reddit. There's a sub-Reddit for people joining and another for aviation ... was able to map out things in my head that I was interested in.

—Female Officer

d. Participants in some groups learned about life in the military from friends

Participants also learned about what life would be like in the military from friends who were currently in the military or had previously served. Women were more likely than men and officers were more likely than enlisted personnel to provide this response.

For me it was definitely through my friends and talking about bases and what they have to offer, like gyms, pools, and commissaries. It sounded like it would be a good environment.

—Male Officer

Similar to everyone else, I learned through family and friends ...

—Enlisted Woman

I joined in '98, which was peace time. Because of 9/11 and other things, recruiting was different, and I wanted to hear everyone's reason for joining. There was no social media so recruiting was really different. I went to Catholic school, and recruiters were not allowed, and I had no military family. I found out about the [Service] from a friend, and we were athletes. I had to seek out a recruiter. I enlisted first; then, while I was in college, they asked me to come because they didn't have a lot of women recruiting and interacting with people at the malls. Recruiting is very different now. You don't see them at the malls. You see them at schools or other campuses, then on all the social media platforms.

—Female Officer

B. Factors That Encouraged Joining the Military

DACOWITS asked focus group participants what factors encouraged them or someone like them to choose military service over other employment and educational opportunities. Participants were also asked whether those factors were similar or different for women and men. Participants reported being encouraged to join the military by benefits, perceived job stability, family members, travel opportunities and other unique experiences, patriotism, improved life circumstances, and a lack of other professional or academic opportunities. Participants' opinions were mixed on whether the factors that encourage women and men to join the military are similar or different, with participants in most groups reporting encouraging factors that are similar for women and men and participants in some groups reporting encouraging factors that differ for women and men.

1. Participants in most groups were encouraged to join because of the benefits offered by the military

Participants were encouraged to join because of benefits the military offers, including educational benefits, pay, medical benefits, and housing. Participants cited being able to pursue a college degree at no cost to them as a major factor that encouraged them to join the military.

Education. I got a bachelor's degree at no cost.

—Female Officer

The medical benefits and educational opportunities. Also, the chance to change my lifestyle. The stability, and tuition assistance.

—Enlisted Woman

There are not a lot of opportunities available to kids at the age most of us join the military that provide the amount of things the military does, like a steady paycheck, benefits, especially if you don't come from privilege or means.

—Male Officer

I didn't have an education. My wife was pregnant and needed health insurance. I was a 20-year-old with a pregnant wife. There were not too many opportunities back then in 2007 and 2008 where you could get into a job that gave health benefits. That was a major factor. ...

—Male Officer

I wanted to get a degree. Very young in my career I knew I wanted to go officer, [and] the [Service] could pay for my bachelor's degree, and I [would] not have student loans. That was a big thing that put me over the edge.

—Female Officer

2. Participants in most groups were encouraged to join because of perceived job stability

Participants were encouraged to join because of the perceived job stability offered by the military. This was especially encouraging for participants who experienced large-scale economic downturns that affected job stability in the civilian labor market, such as the economic crash of 2008 and the impact of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) on the job market.

I'm 24, and this is the fourth economic crisis in my life, and job security is a huge thing. I graduated in 2020, and a big thing that pushed me to the military over other things is I knew in 4 years I was going to have a job. That wasn't felt by my peers.

—Female Officer

Job stability. I watched my friends who got out at 5 years [when] COVID hit looking for work again. This is round 2 of 2008–2009. I got a raise and bought a car, very cool.

—Male Officer

For me it was the stability...

—Enlisted Woman

It was a stable job opportunity that I could get after the [economic] crash in [2008].

—Male Officer

I come from New York City. You have so much competition, and everyone always has more experience. They [employers] always want experience. I could never find a job when I was 18. My dad didn't want to hear from me, so I decided to join.

—Enlisted Woman

3. Participants in most groups were encouraged to join the military by family members

Participants were encouraged to join by family members, including family members without military experience. Enlisted personnel were more likely than officers to provide this response.

... Both my uncles were special forces, and they wanted me to join.

—Enlisted Man

I had encouragement from my family and my wife's family. The only discouraging thing was being away from the connections and people I love and finding new people I can connect with.

—Enlisted Woman

My mother encouraged me towards the [Service]. She would make comments about it when I was a teenager, and I was like, "Okay, I'm getting the hints."

—Enlisted Man

My stepdad wanted me to join because he couldn't.

—Enlisted Woman

I have two older brothers who are serving now, and they encouraged me.

—Enlisted Man

4. Participants in some groups were encouraged to join because of perceived travel opportunities and the chance to have other unique experiences

Participants were encouraged to join by the perception that they would be able to travel to interesting locations and experience unique work environments and activities as part of their experience in the military.

Doing something different than what everyone else from high school is doing.

—Enlisted Man

I wanted to do something cool. I always dreamed of being an astronaut, so this is a good second place.

—Female Officer

Ability to travel and get paid to do so.

—Enlisted Man

The [Service] also exposes you to life experiences you may not have had in your homelife. All those things I didn't see at the time were factors ..., but as I reflected back, those were the driving factors why I joined and stay.

—Male Officer

The opportunity to do things you won't get to in the civilian field.

—Enlisted Man

5. Participants in some groups were encouraged to join because of patriotism or the desire to serve their country

Participants were encouraged to join the military because of a belief in their Service's mission, to achieve a sense of purpose, or from a desire to serve their country. Men were more likely than women to provide this response, and respondents from one Service were more likely to provide this response.

For me... the job was part of it, then pride in country as well. I joined around 9/11, [and] all that coupled with the benefits, housing—I don't know any civilian field ... [that] had [all those benefits].

—Female Officer

The challenge for me is I don't know what I would have done. I think I would have done construction. A sense of service and pushing my life further were factors.

—Enlisted Man

For me, it's the mission.

—Male Officer

I was really good at school, but I had it in my mind to do something bigger than myself before college.

—Enlisted Man

6. Participants in some groups were encouraged to join to improve their own life circumstances

Participants were encouraged to join the military to improve certain life circumstances, such as difficult family relationships, homelessness, negative friend influences, and a dislike for their hometown.

... I was in medical school when I joined ... I joined because I came from a broken family. I wouldn't have made it if I had stayed. That's why I joined. It wasn't the benefits or anything the [Service] was offering.

—Enlisted Woman

When I went into [the] office and said I wanted to join, I was in a rough time because I got laid off. I was living out of a Ford Explorer. "What do you have?" And they said, "We'll give you two hots and a cot." "You'll give me a bed, and I get three meals, and you pay me?" And they gave me a bonus. 100 percent I'm in. I'll do whatever you need.

—Male Officer

I took a year off after high school. I wasn't a great student and was good athlete but then got into drugs. So, I visited friends in college and figured I'd kill myself if I went there. So, I decided to enlist and get some discipline, and that changed the trajectory of my life.

—Male Officer

The pay, and the constant stability of the pay, and the fact that I could get out of my hometown and current situation ...

—Enlisted Woman

7. Participants in a few of the groups were encouraged to join because they disliked other professional and academic settings or lacked other similar opportunities

Participants were encouraged to join the military because they disliked opportunities from other professional or academic settings or because they lacked access to other opportunities that could provide similar experiences to the military.

More community and relationships. I watched my friends have corporate workplaces, 9 to 5 shallow relationships. I stayed in because I have a deep ... sense of belonging in my units so far. I have enjoyed that.

—Male Officer

I would say structure. I worked in the ER [emergency room] beforehand, and there is none.

—Female Officer

Having worked professionally after school, not in the military, I kind of realized I didn't want to do it. So, that was [a] driving factor for me.

—Male Officer

... My hometown doesn't offer anything. I'm 34, and compared to my peers, I've done a lot of things they haven't done ...

—Enlisted Woman

8. Participants' opinions were mixed on whether the factors that encourage women and men to join the military are similar or different

Participants reported mixed opinions on whether the factors that encourage women and men to join the military are similar or different. Participants in most groups highlighted factors that encourage both men and women to join the military, participants in some groups highlighted factors that may be more encouraging for one gender, and participants in some groups indicated the factors that encourage individuals to join the military are more dependent on their personality than their gender.

a. Participants in most groups felt the factors that encourage women and men to join the military were similar

Participants from most groups highlighted similar factors that encourage both men and women to join the military, including benefits, travel opportunities, patriotism, and job training opportunities.

The education benefits are similar. The opportunities you have to grow your career not only while you're in and but also when you get out—the GI Bill for kids. There [are] similarities for both genders, but I'm sure there are differences.

—Female Officer

What's the three reasons you want to join? Why do you want to serve? It's the same three for men and women. It's medical, it's [getting paid on the] 1st and 15th, and to see the world.

—Male Officer

I think they are pretty similar. I haven't heard otherwise from people I have talked to. It's education benefits, housing benefits, [and] things like that.

—Enlisted Man

Similar. A lot of the guys I talk to—they came in for education and medical insurance. I think it's the same for females.

—Enlisted Woman

I would say it's similar. A lot of the reasons I joined—I see the same in the young [Service members] as well. The training and travel.

—Enlisted Woman

I think at the core it's pretty similar because of patriotism and duty to your country. I think that's a concurrent factor for both genders.

—Male Officer

b. Participants in some groups felt the factors that encourage women and men to join the military were different

Participants from some groups highlighted factors that may be more encouraging for women or men to join the military. Participants felt men might be more encouraged to join the military to experience combat and other physical military activities, while women might be more likely to join for the benefits.

... I think it's different for men and women because men have this ability to be [physically] stronger, and people appreciate that in the military.

—Enlisted Woman

I would say it was a little different because, coming into [occupational specialty], a lot of the guys there want to kill bad guys and do bad stuff, and I think it's a little different for us [women].

—Enlisted Woman

There is a massive social reward for men joining the military. You have to acknowledge that. That's what set the standard for what a man is [in] every movie, war heroes. Guys see that as they see themselves on screen. They see the archetype of a man. ... Right, wrong, or indifferent, it's a factor. Women don't get a reward [or] that feeling of "I did something [that] is socially expected or rewarded." It's a novelty when they join. That probably makes it harder for them to join and stay.

—Male Officer

I think they're different. For males, I think they want more of the "GI Joe thing." You know, to handle big guns and show off. I think for females it's harder... not harder, but we just want to be able to do the same thing as men, and sometimes it's hard for females to do that and take on more.

—Enlisted Woman

I think the messaging you see to a degree has some differences between men and women. ... Commercials or social media from military branch official pages, they will show men going in talking about that war hero type and then interview women going through basic training about why they are joining [and] standard lines [of] talk about job benefits, onsite training, education benefits. It seems like many times that's the messaging pushed out to women as why you should join. Men are still getting pushed by the narrative about it being masculine. Different channels being pushed.

—Male Officer

c. Participants in some groups reported factors that encourage individuals to join the military are based on the individual rather than their gender

Participants from some groups indicated the factors that encourage individuals to join the military are similar for men and women but only because those factors are based on individual personalities or experiences, rather than their gender. For example, an individual may be encouraged to join the military because they grew up in a military family—but not because of their gender. Enlisted personnel were more likely than officers to provide this response.

I think it depends on the individual. Mentally and physically, I've seen men tap out. I went into the [military program], and two [men] were sent home because they couldn't hack it. For me, it depends on the person's mental stability and also what is important to them...

—Enlisted Woman

I also think it depends on the experiences the individual's gone through. Say the female's family is very military-oriented, or she has male siblings [who] join the Service, or because her father or great-grandfather joined. They [women] may feel pressured. There are some whose dad may not validate them if they don't join.

—Enlisted Man

What drives people to join has to do with circumstances. Everyone joins for different reasons. I can say being in 19 years, a lot of things you've gone through.... I learn new things every day, but everyone has a different mindset on why they sign on the line or stay. Whether it's one enlistment or six. Every day is changing. New incentives coming in for new acquisitions. Whether we do get enlistment bonus or whatever, there is something that drives us to join and stay.

—Enlisted Woman

I think it's very person dependent—their parents and the values given to them.

—Male Officer

C. Factors That Discouraged Joining the Military

DACOWITS asked focus group participants what factors could discourage someone from joining the military and whether these factors were similar or different for women and men. Participants reported being discouraged from joining the military by negative societal perceptions of the military; family members; impacts of deployments, training cycles, and permanent change of station (PCS) moves on families; challenges of balancing family life with military responsibilities; and the political climate or possibility of war. Participants' opinions were mixed on whether the factors that discourage women and men from joining the military are similar or different, with participants in most groups reporting different discouraging factors for women and men.

1. Participants in most groups felt negative societal perceptions of the military discourages individuals from joining the military

Participants reported that individuals are discouraged from joining the military because of negative societal perceptions of the military. Participants raised media coverage on high rates of sexual assault in the military and the 2020 murder of Specialist Vanessa Guillén at Fort Hood² as two primary examples.

² Fort Hood was renamed Fort Cavazos on May 9, 2023.

Negative perspectives shared on social media by Service members were also noted, a factor that has increased the growth and prevalence of social media platforms. Officers were more likely than enlisted personnel to provide this response.

On social media now, the [Service] sub-Reddit has things that no one thought about being aired out. Toxic command climates, people being sent to [training programs] twice in 60 days with no warning, people sent to Europe; they don't want to reenlist again. They deploy somewhere back-to-back. Now that stuff is being seen more on social media or posts about Vanessa Guillén; people see it. Ten years ago, no one saw that.

—Male Officer

Sexual assault in the news and things that have happened to women in all the branches has been a point of cover. People have asked me and expressed concerns about joining. I also know officers who have gotten out because of how sexual assault cases were handled as well.

—Female Officer

Also the perceived or real issue of sexual assault in the military discourages from joining. They see a lot of publicity, and it's pretty negative, and they ask me, "Is that what it really is like?"

—Enlisted Man

I think another perception could be fast growth of social media. Some people mentioned they had military families to see how the lifestyle is, and a lot of people on social media put a lot of stuff out there that highlights the negative and some that highlights the positive. So, it's all about what they're seeing that builds the perception.

—Male Officer

... On the other hand, a lot more media attention has been given to the negative aspects of the military. Specifically, the sexual assault epidemic in all branches. ... Going back to the murder of Vanessa Guillén, that was huge for parents to discourage women from joining the [Service].

—Male Officer

... The sexual assault cases too, like the Fort Hood case, could shape people's view of the military and may be a fear factor.

—Male Officer

2. Participants in most groups reported being discouraged from joining the military by family members

Participants reported that individuals may be discouraged from joining the military by their family members for a variety of reasons, including cultural beliefs or fears about the military being a dangerous career choice.

Mine was like an intervention. They (my family) thought I was going through a period of confusion.

—Female Officer

My mom didn't want me to join. She's a Jehovah's Witness. She said this is not a job for a woman. But I don't take no for an answer, so I joined up.

—Enlisted Woman

My immediate family discouraged me. My mom and one of my little sisters were not for it...

—Enlisted Man

Both of my parents thought I was crazy for joining. I think my dad looked on the news a lot and looked at the big wigs on TV, and there weren't a lot of minorities. So, I think that affected them and made them want to discourage me.

—Male Officer

My mother was antimilitary in general; she didn't talk to me for the first 9 months I joined the military. She was bummed, but ultimately I was an adult and made my own choice ...

—Female Officer

My grandpa was upset, though, and convinced I would go on a boat and go kill children. But I do paperwork, you know. Now he sees I'm not on the front lines, but before he said if I leave, it's not going to work out.

—Enlisted Woman

3. Participants in some groups reported the impact of military duties on family life could discourage individuals from joining

Participants reported individuals may be discouraged from joining by various military-related activities that take them away from their families, such as deployments, training cycles, and unpredictable or frequent PCS moves. Men were more likely than women and officers were more likely than enlisted personnel to provide this response.

I think deployments. Knowing that most likely you will be away from your family for 6 months at a time.

—Male Officer

I've been here less than a year, and now I'm going to move. A hard thing with kids is trying to get them settled.

—Female Officer

The number of units has stayed the same, but the number of rotations to ... training deployments where you can't talk to your family for 30 days or more. We're not at war, so why are you gone half the year?

—Male Officer

There is a lack of taking care of people. Some [Service members] get back-to-back [deployment] tours. So, if you have someone that spent 6 or 7 years straight on [where they could be deploying], I think that's a big piece of it.

—Male Officer

I'm not sure if that was the same now but leaving for deployments. You couldn't be a single mother joining. And females—not that a mother and father are different—but for men, I think it's easier to leave for deployment. My wife wouldn't join and can't imagine leaving our kids.

—Enlisted Man

And definitely PCS moves. Having to pick up and move your family every 4 years, honestly, just to do it. It turns a lot of people away.

—Male Officer

4. Participants in some groups felt individuals could be discouraged from joining because of perceived challenges of creating and maintaining a family in the military

Participants reported individuals may be discouraged from joining the military if they perceived challenges balancing military responsibilities with family life would be too difficult. Participants indicated those considering joining may be influenced by a societal perception that individuals would have to choose military service or having a family. Respondents from one Service were more likely to provide this response.

I don't know if we let people know you can join and have a family and have kids. There was a [Service] cadet program at a school close by. There was an event there my friend invited me to, and I was talking to all the kids in the [Service] cadet program, and several girls in the group asked me, "When did you decide to join over having a family?" I think they picture in their head that you join, and you're shipped off to fight for the country and have no personal life ...

—Female Officer

What discourages women—and for me I'm thinking about how long I'm going to stay in—is how long I'm going to be away from my family. Time spent away from family is a big discouragement.

—Female Officer

I left the [Service] for 6 years before I pinned on Major because I did not believe ... I would be able to have a family. We wanted a family.

—Female Officer

5. Participants in some groups reported people could be discouraged to join the military by the political climate and possibility of war

Participants reported individuals could be discouraged from joining due to the political climate or the likelihood of war when joining. Specifically, participants indicated that family members may be more likely to discourage individuals from joining during times of war. Men were more likely than women, officers were more likely than enlisted personnel, and respondents from one Service were more likely to provide this response.

We haven't been in war in a long time, but when Russia is kicking off right now, parents are like, I don't want [my child] to go to war, and other ones are like, hell yeah, let's do this.

—Male Officer

Another thing is, a time of war could discourage folks from joining and—even if they wanted to join. Maybe their parents would talk them out of it.

—Male Officer

China and Russia.

—Enlisted Woman

PCS moves and deployments, and not knowing what the future holds. Like, if you join today, but you might have to go to war tomorrow.

—Male Officer

6. Participants in all groups reported men and women experience different forms of discouragement from joining the military

Participants in all groups highlighted factors that are more likely to discourage women from joining the military, such as challenges in building and maintaining a family and a fear of sexual assault, while participants in some groups highlighted factors that may be similarly discouraging for both women and men. No unique factors that would be more likely to discourage men were raised by participants.

a. Participants in most groups reported women are more likely to be discouraged from joining by challenges related to building and maintaining a family

Participants reported women are more likely than men to be discouraged from joining the military by perceived challenges related to building and maintaining a family while serving. Specifically, participants indicated women are more likely than men to be family-oriented and hold their family-related responsibilities above their military responsibilities. Participants also felt women are more likely to be the primary caregiver for children and felt child care coverage issues would be a more discouraging factor for women who are thinking about joining the military. Officers were more likely than enlisted personnel and respondents from one Service were more likely to provide this response.

It depends on what the person's main objective is. For me, I'm a family-oriented person. My family comes first. If I'm one of those people who wants to stay, have stability, if I wanted to stay home near my family, it would discourage me [from joining]. While my husband is family-oriented, he doesn't care; it wouldn't bother him as much. It depends on the particular person's main focus.

—Female Officer

For some women, if they have a family or children prior to the [Service], that would be more challenging for them, if they have to leave their children for deployments or boot camp. It's a factor more for a woman than men.

—Female Officer

I think the family aspect is different for females and males. My husband and I would talk, and when we speak about the family, we talk about me getting out and him staying in, and I think we think about things differently.

—Enlisted Woman

Child care seems to fall on women's shoulders. Right now, the [Service] system doesn't make that easy, especially if you're in a dual-military relationship.

—Male Officer

We get pregnant, we carry the children, and you're not mission capable because you got pregnant. It takes two to tango, though, but it's our fault [it becomes a negative thing] because we carry the child.

—Enlisted Woman

b. Participants in some groups reported that women are more likely to be discouraged from joining due to concerns of being sexually assaulted

Participants reported that women are more likely than men to be discouraged from joining the military out of a concern they may be sexually assaulted. Participants indicated the possibility of sexual assault may also be a major factor that influences family members to discourage women from joining the military. Men were more likely than women, officers were more likely than enlisted personnel, and respondents from one Service were more likely to provide this response.

I think the obvious one is women and people who care about that woman will discourage her from joining because she would be vulnerable for sexual harassment and sexual assault; that's a number one thing. If my sister told me she was joining, I would support her, but let's talk about the realities of some of this stuff. My dad would be uncomfortable with that [his daughter joining]. Dads in the current generation would be like, "I'm worried about you." It's not coming from a bad place; it's a place of concern. Women see that "I could be at risk for something." It's like going to a male prison where males are stuck and can't leave. The male-to-female ratio is way out of whack; it's on a lot of people's minds. If no one said that, I was going to have to.

—Male Officer

I think the difference would be sexual harassment and sexual assault; like you said, there's a stigma with the [Service] that is much more prevalent and widespread. In my experience, sexual harassment ... in speaking with females in the [Service], it is way more prevalent than I assumed it was, honestly. I've been shocked at the number of females that have confided in me where things have happened in a previous unit. I have two boys. If I had a daughter, I would not allow her to join to be subjected at a minimum to some form of harassment. It's definitely a factor that females weigh more than males when it comes to joining. Females, they will be 2-to-1 harassed more than males. Males do get harassed but much more diminished than females in my experience.

—Enlisted Man

All the negative cases about sexual assault and similar situations that center around a female—that makes a dangerous environment for them to be joining. If I was a woman on the outside, and the image is centered around those instances, I wouldn't want to join.

—Male Officer

Sexual assault is something men don't think about or worry about. They aren't brought up thinking about that. That is a conversation people, when joining, they will bring that up. Regardless of the stats, your parents care about you, and women who join are more likely than not to be sexually assaulted ...

—Female Officer

7. Participants in some groups reported that women and men experience similar forms of discouragement from joining the military

Participants reported various similarities in the factors that discourage men and women from joining the military, including the impact of deployment on families and a lack of patriotism among America's youth.

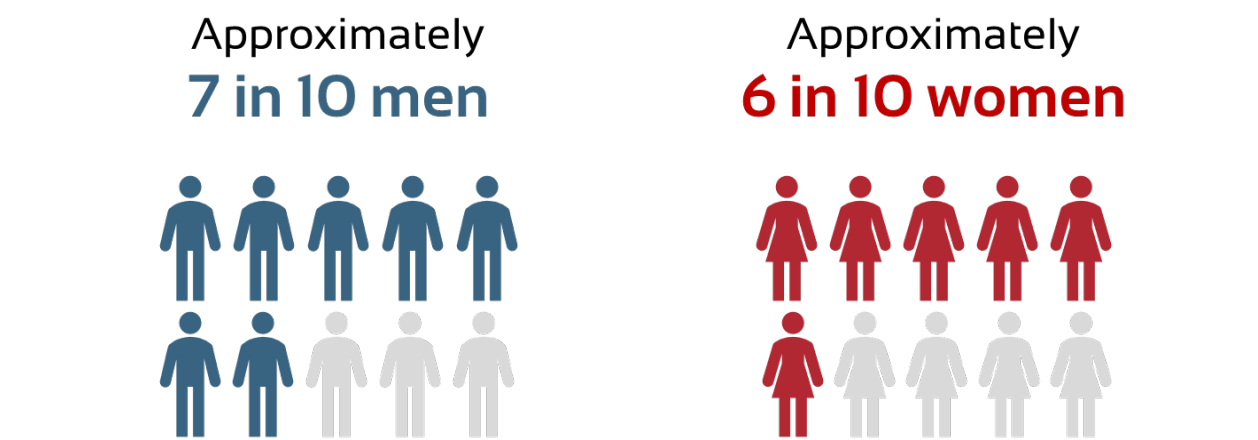
D. Recommendations to Make Young Women More Inclined to Join the Military

DACOWITS asked focus group participants what their Service could do to make young women more inclined to join the military. Participants recommended various strategies to make young women more inclined toward military service, including implementing policies and other efforts to support the development and maintenance of families in the military, advancing ongoing efforts to prevent and respond to sexual assault, and continuing efforts to attract women through strategic marketing.

1. The majority of participants would recommend military service to a young woman today

DACOWITS asked focus group participants to raise their hand if they would recommend military service for a young woman today. Responses were relatively similar from women and men, with about 7 in 10 men and 6 in 10 women recommending military service for young women today. However, there was high variance across focus group responses (see Figure 2.1). For instance, in several focus groups, no participants raised their hand, and in a few focus groups, only one participant raised their hand in support of recommending military service for young women today.

Figure 2.1 Proportion of Participants by Gender Who Would Recommend Military Service to a Young Woman Today



Source: Focus group transcripts

2. Participants in most groups recommended better support for families in the military could make women more inclined to join

Participants reported women may be more inclined to join the military if their Service introduced policies or made stronger efforts to support the development and maintenance of families in the military. For example, participants reported expanded child care options would make women more

inclined to join the military, including more affordable child care options for junior enlisted personnel and flexible child care hours for Service members who work night shifts.

Participants also highlighted challenges female single parents have joining the military and recommended the Services reconsider the necessity of having them create a family care plan to join because this process may discourage them from joining. Participants also recommended greater access to and more autonomy in the selection of reproductive healthcare services given the limited choices of medical providers at some military installations.

Participants also acknowledged the recent expansion of caregiver leave policies³ as a step in the right direction for making women more inclined to join the military but recommended the Military Services market this policy change and share stories of Service members who have used this benefit to ensure women thinking about joining the military are aware of this policy and benefit. Finally, participants indicated improved co-location options for dual-military families would make women more inclined to join the military. Women were more likely than men to provide this response.

Being a mother in the military with the lack of child care the military has ... I think if young women are going in knowing they would have more support with their children, it would be more favorable for them. The challenge I had and that my junior [Service members] have had is the cost of daycare is so expensive. With trying to get people, trying to get into on-base daycare, it's a big challenge with the [Service] ...

—Female Officer

It's like a fork in the road. Go the family route and not progress professionally or focus on my career. Not saying that is the choice, but it seems like that's how it's presented.

—Male Officer

I think a big thing is following through on the initiatives put forth, like the breastfeeding room. That's a great initiative, but I still have a janitor's closet in the maintenance shop I have to work in. My husband had to get out of the [Service] because we were on the [child care] waitlist for 8 months on three different bases. So, making sure the initiatives are followed through and making sure those things are happening.

—Female Officer

Someone may be nervous depending on where they are stationed. They may not join because they would question if they would always have that [reproductive healthcare] autonomy.

—Enlisted Woman

Talking about family. I was a boot camp instructor. If they knew that they were getting into a family-friendly environment, that would help. Even if you have a child when younger enlisted, you have to worry about housing and getting into daycare because they can't afford outside child care when they're junior enlisted. That would help put them more at ease.

—Male Officer

³ In January 2023, the Department of Defense expanded the Military Parental Leave Program (MPLP). MPLP now provides 12 weeks of paid parental leave for birth and nonbirth parents. Birth parents are also eligible for 6 weeks of paid convalescent leave (DoD, 2023).

I will touch up on what I mentioned earlier: single women joining. I think that having a child ..., they have to test their family care plan. ... Telling them no off the gate [they can't join unless they have a family care plan in place] discourages them from joining. I don't know if that's still a thing, but last time I heard it is.

—Enlisted Man

... Dual-military couples working in the [Service]—they may get separate areas to work at. They could do co-location better for them as man and wife. Divorce is high in the military because they don't get stationed together or see each other.

—Enlisted Woman

3. Participants in some groups felt the Services could do more to mitigate and address instances of sexual assault to make women more inclined to join the military

Participants acknowledged that the Military Services have made progress toward mitigating and addressing instances of sexual assault. However, participants also indicate further progress in this regard could help ensure women feel safer joining the military. Respondents from one Service were more likely to provide this response.

... We have improved [sexual assault prevention and response] immensely in the last decade, and if we can do that and make women safer and make women feel like the military cares about them, we can go a long way.

—Enlisted Woman

Create a safer environment for them. I feel like I've heard stories of female friends I went to boot camp with and friends I have now, when they encountered sexual assault, there wasn't really a ... they can talk to someone but with fear of retaliation. I think it's also a traditional thing with men in the [Service]—we see a new "E-nothing" ... and automatically he's on the prowl. If the [Service] gets to the issue, expresses it, and creates a safer environment, they will be way more likely to join.

—Enlisted Man

Standing up for what's right in the cases where there are cases of sexual assault. Making a more equitable working environment and making policies to promote that kind of change.

—Male Officer

4. Participants in some groups recommended maintaining and expanding strategic marketing targeted toward women

Participants acknowledged the Military Services' recent marketing campaigns have been more gender inclusive. Participants recommended the military continue these efforts to ensure marketing efforts continue to represent servicewomen but also recommended the Military Services do a better job of marketing benefits associated with joining the military, especially those that would be attractive to women with children who are interested in joining the military. Participants also recommended the Military Services market military service as an opportunity to gain job skills that are transferable to the civilian labor market to make women more inclined to join. Men were more likely than women to provide this response.

Back to that commercial, it was a bunch of young dudes, so you're aiming at college kids, but there is a whole group out there, mainly mothers who are nervous they can't support their family. So, making the benefits more known because a recruiter is going to tell you the basics, but they don't always tap into the health benefits because they aren't trying to tell you about the medical benefits if you get pregnant because they don't want you to get in and get pregnant. But if they were going to tell older moms, or women who want a family, about how the [Service] could provide child care, education, and healthcare ... you learn all of that after the fact. Like, maternity leave, you learn that as you go. But if you pushed them out and made it seem like a family-friendly type of view, you could have more women.

—Enlisted Woman

I think that representation is important. If you see someone that looks like you, I think that's an important thing, and I've seen more of that in the last few years.

—Male Officer

The general public doesn't understand the military goes to different schools to advance yourself and your career, [so] you have transferable qualifications to the civilian world. If people associated that with the benefits of joining the military, it's not jumping out of planes into Ukraine. It's I can get a qualification and certify, and that correlates to a civilian job where I can live where I want to live. That will attract more people to join and not just getting people who want to kick down doors. They want to advance themselves and serve a higher purpose. That becomes more about personal advancement and gets a wider group of people interested in joining.

—Male Officer

Just more representation. I saw a commercial that put me in my feels [emotional].

—Enlisted Woman

E. Experience With Recruiters and the Recruitment Process

DACOWITS asked focus group participants about how they engaged with their recruiter during the recruitment process, what they liked and disliked about their recruitment experience, what barriers may hinder women in particular during the recruitment process, and what recommendations they would make to improve the recruitment of women.

Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences with their main recruiter or the person who was the primary point of contact during the period when they joined. For officer groups, participants were encouraged to reflect on their primary point of contact they interacted with prior to joining their Service. For the remainder of this section, we will refer to these people as “recruiters.”

1. Participants engaged with their recruiter at various frequencies and through different mechanisms

Participants in some groups reported engaging with their primary recruiter at least once a week while being recruited, while participants in a few groups reported engaging with their recruiters on a daily or monthly basis. Participants from most groups reported engaging with their recruiter in person, especially for physical training activities, or over the phone.

Mine was frequent in the beginning and less frequent after signing ...

—Male Officer

I'm from a small town close to San Antonio. The recruiter was like three blocks from my parents. After school on some days, I would go to [the] park and do physical tests, so I was ready for [the physical fitness test]. My dad would go down to make sure he wasn't lying about anything. We communicated well.

—Enlisted Woman

My recruiter required that I call him every Monday and report ... to make sure we didn't get in trouble [over the weekend].

—Enlisted Man

Primarily phone and text and meeting in person half the time. But most information was exchanged through phone or text.

—Male Officer

2. Participants cited multiple factors they liked about their experience being recruited into the military

DACOWITS asked focus group participants what they liked about being recruited into the military. Participants in some groups liked that their recruiter was honest with them, was personable, and shared their own experiences. Participants also liked that their recruiting process was quick and simple.

a. Participants in some groups liked that their recruiter was honest with them during the recruitment process

Participants appreciated that their recruiter was honest with them during the recruitment process. For example, participants indicated that recruiters were honest about advantages and disadvantages of life in the military, their familiarity (or lack thereof) with certain occupational specialties, and challenges single parents might face in joining the military. Men were more likely than women and enlisted personnel were more likely than officers to provide this response.

I did a lot of research beforehand.... I told him I wanted an office job and didn't want [other occupational specialties], and I ended up getting into [occupational specialty], and he was straightforward about him not knowing a lot [about that occupational specialty].

—Enlisted Man

My experience was straightforward. He gave me the facts as they were, but he was my brother-in-law too, so he wouldn't lie.

—Enlisted Woman

Mine was extremely open and honest. Single parents joining ... I had to join ... which we'll go into single parents joining military [and how they] should be allowed to with family care plans versus making them get married. Mine was very open and honest about it.

—Enlisted Woman

My recruiter was pushing me towards what he wanted me to do. He was honest with me about what he didn't know.

—Enlisted Man

b. Participants in a few of the groups liked that their recruiter felt personable and shared their own experiences during the recruiting process

Participants from a few groups reported they liked their recruiter's personality and appreciated how they shared stories about their time in the military during the recruitment process.

I met four different guys who went in and out of the [recruiting] office, and all of them looked like they were having a great time. I was in there laughing my [expletive] off at the stories they'd tell.

—Enlisted Man

The hook for me was the experience. My "recruiter" was my family friend, my wife's family, and their positive views of service. I was listening to what he did, how he did it, and some of his experiences is what drew me to apply for college.

—Male Officer

The [Service] guys were always clowning when I walked by. They were more the type of people I saw myself being friends within or outside of the military. So, when I stopped walking by their office and started talking to them, it made my recruiting process easier and better. I felt like I had more camaraderie between me and them.

—Male Officer

c. Participants in a few of the groups liked that the recruitment process was quick and simple

Participants reported liking that their recruitment process was quick and simple.

It was a relatively fast process. I was ready to join.

—Enlisted Man

It was quick. It was a quick way out of my hometown.

—Enlisted Man

I got recruited in '08 when they were having a big [military] surge and the recession. It was simple because they needed people, and so they just did everything. I had a decent experience being recruited because they needed everybody; they didn't care. It was quick and painless.

—Male Officer

3. Participants cited multiple factors they disliked about their experience being recruited into the military

DACOWITS asked focus group participants what they disliked about being recruited into the military. Participants in some groups disliked that their recruiter was dishonest or overly coercive with them and pushed them toward occupational specialties outside of what they desired. Participants in some groups found challenges with their experience at Military Entrance Processing Stations (MEPS).

a. Participants in some groups disliked that their recruiter was dishonest or overly coercive with them during the recruitment process

Participants reported disliking that they felt their recruiter “sugar-coated” information during the recruitment process. This included information about choice of occupational specialty and a sense that recruiters told prospective applicants what they wanted to hear.

I would say a lack of transparency. There is a lot of sugar-coating, of course. No one would join if we knew what we were truly getting ourselves into. It's how things work.

—Enlisted Woman

There are empty promises from recruiters who sugar-coat things saying you could get exactly what you want out of it. You arrive at MEPS, and you don't get a single thing you want. They are pushing you down the drain when you're committed, telling you all these things. You can get confused. Is it what I want, or is it what they are telling me I want?

—Enlisted Woman

With the recruiters? They lie. They tell you what you want to hear. I would have gone [Service] hindsight and not the [Service].

—Enlisted Man

I honestly didn't care what my recruiter was telling me. I honestly didn't care. He was dishonest a lot, and I didn't do much research. I didn't have a plan B.

—Enlisted Man

b. Participants in a few of the groups did not like that their recruiter pushed them toward a military occupational specialty (MOS) other than what they desired

Participants reported disliking that their recruiter pushed them to pursue occupational specialties other than what they desired, including women being pushed into combat arms occupational specialties to increase the representation and integration of women in these fields.

My recruiter tried to get me to be an [occupational specialty]. I did what I wanted; I had done my research. I knew.

—Enlisted Man

When I was looking at enlisting, I didn't know ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps] was an option. I was trying to figure out what I could do, the shortest amount of training before the school year. He pushed me into [combat arms occupational specialty]; I didn't realize it was political, and they were pushing females into it. There were several [occupational specialties] that had openings, but I felt backed into a corner. It wasn't until later that I learned ROTC was an option. That's a better way to get a degree and had more options for service. So initially I didn't like that because he was backing me into a corner to meet the agenda.

—Female Officer

[My recruiter] wanted me to be a cook. “No, sorry.”

—Enlisted Man

[My recruiter] was trying to get me to go to the [occupational specialty] with the biggest bonus. I didn't want to be a fueler and get blown up.

—Enlisted Man

c. Participants in some groups disliked their experience at the MEPS

Participants reported disliking their experience at the MEPS, including not getting the occupational specialty they desired and feeling underprepared by their recruiter for the MEPS process.

I was sent to MEPS to do the final physical, and my recruiter didn't tell me I couldn't have toenail polish or that I should wear underwear that were appropriate. So when I went, I had to ask the males in the office—I had to tell them that I needed underwear and have something to get the toenail polish off, and it was embarrassing. ... My recruiter never told me what I was supposed to do.

—Enlisted Woman

At MEPS you want to leave tomorrow because you've seen a video of a missile blowing up. My contract changed three times trying to leave because they were like, "We don't need this." That was the only part that was frustrating. Trying to join, I just didn't know when I'm leaving—it could be next week or in 6 months.

—Male Officer

Going to MEPS and signing. Most 18-year-olds aren't going to know their rights.

—Male Officer

4. Participants identified several barriers in the recruitment process that may hinder women from joining the military

DACOWITS asked focus group participants what barriers may hinder women during the recruitment process. Participants in most groups reported the lack of female recruiters presented a challenge in recruiting women, while participants in some groups reported that certain male recruiter behaviors could be a barrier to recruiting women. Participants in a few groups noted policies affecting single parents may be more likely to affect women in the recruitment process. Participants also reported fears of being sexually assaulted in the military and college campus policies related to ROTC students may be a barrier to recruiting females into the military.

a. Participants in most groups reported the lack of female recruiters presents challenges for recruiting more women

In addition to asking participants about barriers that may hinder women during the recruitment process, DACOWITS asked focus group participants to raise their hand if they had a female recruiter as their main recruiter. About 8 percent of men and 8 percent of women reported having a female recruiter as their main recruiter.

Participants reported that a lack of female recruiters is a barrier to recruiting women for a few reasons, including women not being able to see themselves as a Service member and challenges discussing female-specific experiences in the military during the recruitment process. Men were more likely than women to provide this response.

Approximately 8 percent of both male and female participants had a female recruiter

Not having a female recruiter could be a barrier. "He doesn't look like me."

—Enlisted Man

Representation, there are not a lot of female recruiters. I only had two when I was a company commander, two [noncommissioned officer] females. In a company of 45, there were only three females. Representation matters.

—Female Officer

Yes, and you asked about female recruiters, and none of us had them. Like it would be good to have some girl time and learn about challenges impacting women in the [Service].

—Enlisted Woman

Based on what everyone is saying, we went into an all-men recruiting station. I think it would make a woman stand back if all she sees is males telling their experience in the [Service] rather than getting a woman's perspective. Or she might be more comfortable as a woman talking to another woman about their issues and why they want to leave. As a male, you know nothing about it.

—Enlisted Man

Human nature and just joining a male-dominated environment. Females might be apprehensive. You have to see people that don't look like you and might not know how to take care of you.

—Male Officer

I wouldn't say hinder, but if a male recruiter was articulating their perspectives on service, it would be a little different than a female recruiter [talking] about starting a family or not, having certain experiences. It's not a hinderance, but it would help to have someone they can emulate recruiting them. If they can see themselves 10 to 15 years from now, that would be super helpful; that's what drew me in. If I didn't want to be the guy that drew me in, it would be harder.

—Male Officer

b. Participants in some groups reported certain male recruiter behaviors may be a barrier to female recruitment

Participants reported certain male recruiter behaviors may be a barrier to women deciding to join the military during the recruitment process. Participants reported unprofessional or "creepy" behavior from male recruiters, misinformed or unknowledgeable recruiters, and male recruiters not being comfortable interacting with female recruits or not taking them seriously. Enlisted personnel were more likely than officers to provide this response.

A creepy 24-year-old guy in a high school is a huge barrier to overcome. I saw the Sergeant I was working for repeatedly make a fool of himself. He had no clue, and I know he wasn't getting any females at that school, and it wasn't on purpose. I'm sorry if that's crass.

—Enlisted Man

Some recruiters are just creeps; let's be honest. If he's being weird, she's going to say goodbye.

—Enlisted Man

It's the recruiter, where they might not take a female serious. I have seen it where it is a lot harder for women to try to get into the [Service].

—Male Officer

c. Participants in a few of the groups reported policies affecting single parents may be a barrier to female recruitment

Participants indicated that for some Military Services, single parents are required to give up temporary custody of their child to join the military. Participants indicated that requiring single parents to complete a family care plan and asking them to give up temporary custody of their child before joining may be a barrier to female recruitment given their perception that women are more likely to be single parents.

There are a large demographic of women who are stuck in situations who would probably join [if they could]. They will not give up custody of kids because of trust. It is not legal to get military married [married on paper] just to join. There are family care plans, so allow the family care plan in order to join [for single parents].

—Enlisted Woman

Pregnancies. We had in my class ... we had a [Service member] who had to give up custody of her child so she could go through boot camp.

—Female Officer

Family care plan and being a single parent, for sure.

—Enlisted Woman

d. Participants in a few of the groups reported fear of sexual assault in the military may be a barrier to female recruitment

Participants reported that fears of being sexually assaulted in the military may be a barrier to recruiting females into the military. Participants indicated the murder of SPC Vanessa Guillén at Fort Hood and other media coverage of sexual assault in the military exacerbated these fears. Participants also indicated students enrolled in ROTC cannot commission until their Title IX case is complete, acting as a logistical barrier to recruitment into the military.

I don't know what happened at Fort Hood, but I as a woman would be afraid of sexual assault. I come from a background of women that are more passive and tentative of their surroundings, so maybe that's why I'm thinking it, but that's why.

—Male Officer

With ROTC in college campuses in the U.S., if you experience any sexual assault or sexual harassment, there is this loophole that you can't commission until Title IX is complete. You could lose your commission reporting it if Title IX doesn't close your case before you graduate.

—Female Officer

I don't think you'd be more inclined to be sexually assaulted in the military, but as an outsider of the military, that would be my perception. We are the military, so it might be emphasized.

—Male Officer

What's more different now than when I joined is how accessible information is. If they heard about what happened at Fort Hood—social media doesn't show the whole story of what's happening in the military, but when you see a few bad experiences, it stops you from joining. If I had a daughter, she would not join the [Service]. ... The ignorance of not knowing, I think, is shared amongst a lot of civilians. There are TikToks talking about a lot of women being sexually assaulted. Once you've seen one video, it's enough to dissuade you.

—Enlisted Man

5. Participants offered a variety of recommendations to improve the recruitment process for women

DACOWITS asked focus group participants what recommendations they would make to improve the recruitment of women in their Service. Participants in most groups recommended various improvements to the recruiting process itself, including areas of improvement for recruiters. Participants in some groups recommended improvements to their Service's marketing strategies to better attract women to engage with the recruitment process.

a. Participants in most groups recommended improvements to the recruiting process itself, including areas of improvement for recruiters

Participants recommended a variety of areas where their Service's recruitment process could be improved specifically for women, including assigning more female recruiters and implementing more opportunities for prospective female applicants to interact with current servicewomen. Other recommendations included encouraging recruiters not to push women to pursue combat arms occupational specialties and encouraging male recruiters to become more comfortable interacting with women in the recruitment process.

We need to hear from women in the military. Hearing those types of stories will allow young women to assimilate and understand what they need.

—Male Officer

More female recruiters. You could only do so much with what you have. If I'm a female, and a male is telling me what is going on and what it's going to be like, he couldn't walk in their shoes.

—Enlisted Man

Don't be so uncomfortable around women! We are normal human beings. They're [male recruiters] so uncomfortable or so scared because they think we're going to report them for something they didn't do. They don't understand we are also people and also want to serve our country. I don't know why they don't understand or see us as people.

—Enlisted Woman

I would say maybe having more interactions with current female Service members. That could be a barrier. They could learn about their experiences versus learning through social media. And a lot of parents don't want them to join, and they are the bigger picture. If they have a one-on-one conversation with a current Service member, that would probably help.

—Enlisted Man

How can we better recruit females? How can the recruiter message for [focus on] combat arms, but that's not the military. We are only one part of the military. So much more supports the military than combat arms. We are not at war. We plan like we are going to war, but I see that, and when you see the recruitment videos that are targeting females just for combat arms ... maybe they don't want that. Focus on your power to get them to enlist. Stop trying to push them towards combat arms.

—Enlisted Man

Having a woman for them to meet and discuss how they navigated their respective fields as E6 or E7, how they navigated [different assignments] and the CDCs [child development centers]. Whether dual-military relationships or on the officer side and how they got through flight school or got married.

—Male Officer

b. Participants in some groups recommended improvements to marketing strategies to attract more women to join the military

Participants recommended improvements to their Service's marketing strategies could help attract more women to join the military and engage in the recruiting process. These recommendations include marketing the benefits of joining the military, such as medical and educational benefits, because these factors may be more likely to attract women to the military. Additionally, participants recommended the Military Services continue to produce gender-inclusive marketing materials and ensure these materials highlight "safe" occupational specialties that have transferable skills to the civilian labor force because they may be more attractive to women. Men were more likely than women and respondents from one Service were more likely to provide this response.

Just throwing a dart out there. Is there a perception of danger with military life? One thing I found to be true is you're not shooting stuff all the time. Maybe men have a tendency to run toward danger, and women do not. The perception is that the military life is a dangerous life, and it's a mostly safe occupation. That may entice women to join.

—Enlisted Man

Going back to representation, but also Vanessa Guillén ... when it happened, we saw it everywhere. But there are amazing stories too, and we are taking care of our people, and I think those stories should catch fire too. It [Vanessa Guillén's murder] should have never happened, but we should let people know, and especially parents know, that we can keep their children safe.

—Enlisted Woman

Advertise more of the benefits. Eighteen- and 19-year-olds are going to hear "we'll pay for your college." That's the selling point. Not talking about housing allowance. You have to highlight the important things for them. Even saying, "If you're having trouble with child care, there is program, or we can refer you out to civilian daycare."

—Male Officer

Showing success stories and making it to where it wasn't a long, terrible read but "Hey, I joined. It was a good life. If you want to know more, click here." A lot of women in [occupational specialty] don't like being a poster child. I know that turned a lot of women away from it.

—Enlisted Man

I'm not a female, but what I assume most females want, they are not career [Service members]. They are joining the [Service] to get away from whatever situation they are at, [and] some point nurturing takes hold, and they want to be a mother, a spouse. What we should target is these jobs come with these qualification and certificates; it's marketable in the civilian world. Most people who join do their 4 to 5 years and get out.

—Enlisted Man

F. Military Marketing and Advertising

DACOWITS asked focus group participants whether they had seen recent recruitment commercials for their Service and how their Service's recent advertisements compare with those they saw when they were deciding to join the military. When asked by a show of hands, about half the male and half the female participants reported seeing recent advertisements for their Service. Participants held mixed perceptions on how recent recruitment commercials compare with those when they were deciding to join the military.

Half the groups indicated recent advertisements are more gender inclusive. Some groups felt recent recruitment commercials accurately portrayed life in the military, while other groups felt the opposite. DACOWITS also asked focus group participants whether their Service's recent recruitment commercials appeal to both women and men. Participants shared mixed opinions on this question, with participants in most groups indicating recent recruiting commercials appeal to both men and women, while participants in some groups indicated recruiting commercials remain more appealing to men.

1. Participants reported seeing recent advertisements for their Service from a variety of sources

Participants reported seeing recruitment commercials or advertisements for their Service from a variety of sources, including social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and YouTube; television; printed marketing materials and billboards; movies; and event marketing, such as flyovers during sporting events, such as the Super Bowl.

For ours it was interesting; they came on base and started to do our Facebook. They did advertisements where [Service members] will be interviewed. If you wanted to be an [occupational specialist], you could see a job of an [occupational specialty] or [a different occupational specialty], [so] you knew what you were getting yourself into. ... It's very beneficial with social media now to see hands-on life experience then walking by and seeing a sign to join the military.

—Female Officer

Often times, I do see certain Service members go live [on social media platforms], and I notice a lot of people are viewing those and asking questions of how they join, what they do. ... Something that comes to mind is the next generation of recruiters will be embedded in social media. In the next 5 to 10 years, they will have some type of Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok account ...

—Female Officer

I've seen something on Snapchat. It's just a picture of a [Service member]. Nothing of substance.

—Enlisted Man

It might have been during the Super Bowl; the commercial was phenomenal. I was like, "[expletive], I am proud to serve!" It was the F/A-18s I've been serving on. I feel motivated [by the commercial], if only I felt that way every day!

—Female Officer

2. Participants shared mixed perspectives on how recent advertisements compare with those they saw before joining the military

DACOWITS asked focus group participants how their Service's recent recruitment commercials compare with those they saw when deciding to join the military and how well recent recruitment commercials portray the mission and values of their Service. Participants in half the groups reported that recent commercials are more gender inclusive than the advertising campaigns they observed when deciding to join, while participants in some groups shared opposing perspectives about whether recent commercials accurately portray the military and its mission.

a. Participants in half the groups reported today's advertisements are more gender inclusive

Participants reported recent commercials are more gender inclusive than the commercials they saw when deciding to join the military. For example, participants noted White men were formerly most prominently featured in recruiting commercials, but recent marketing campaigns have featured women and Service members of all races. Enlisted personnel were more likely than officers to provide this response.

They are more inclusive, even with the recent stuff. The advertisements now compared to when I was younger. I am older than most of y'all in the room. They were very White male. We can remember the [Service] one and the [Service-specific] campaign. It was very male-oriented. Now the commercials do include females and include all races. They are more inclusive.

—Enlisted Woman

The commercials I saw growing up was for the [Service], and [they were] in the assault mode doing all the things. I saw the [Service-specific] slogan. The imagery moved away from a group of men doing the hardcore things. I'm seeing way more diversity whether it be skin tone, gender, or different stuff. When it comes to recruitment, I think representation matters ...

—Female Officer

I do public affairs for the base. When I joined, it was not as much about inclusion as it is now. Here we push things to be inclusive, which I'm a fan of. In my opinion, it's changing in the right direction.

—Enlisted Man

I think they're different now. They're more diverse, and they're trying to integrate more females and more people in cities. When I joined in 2004, there wasn't a lot of that. I think wanting to be a [Service member] is just enough, and at the end of the day, it's just a commercial.

—Enlisted Woman

b. Participants in some groups reported their Service's current advertisements do not accurately portray life in the military

Participants in some groups felt recent commercials do not accurately portray life in the military, explaining commercials highlight only the exciting parts of military life but not the downtime or less glamorous work responsibilities. Participants noted recent commercials also do not highlight benefits associated with joining the military, such as retirement plans or access to child care. Men were more likely than women to provide this response.

I think they try to make it like Call of Duty now to sell to the younger generations. I'm biased because my [occupational specialty] is in one of the new commercials, but it's like, that's not how that works.

—Male Officer

None of them are realistic. They are about slaying bodies, and none of them are about sitting and doing desk work, and none of them tell you that you don't always do [occupational specialty] work.

—Enlisted Woman

No one talks about healthcare or [retirement plans] in advertising. Or the CDCs and the 2-year waiting list. For healthcare, there is a 23-month wait to see a PCM [primary care manager]. Advertisements don't talk about the benefits of joining—just how cool it is to join.

—Male Officer

It's not accurate; most people won't do it either. ... My career path ended up taking me towards [MOS]. It's a larger portion of the [Service] that will get you boots on the ground.... It is a possibility that you wind up that way in your career. It's a larger part than a small percent that choose that path.

—Enlisted Man

c. Participants in some groups felt current advertisements more accurately portrayed life in the military than previous advertisements

Participants in some groups reported that recent recruitment commercials more accurately portray life in the military than previous advertising campaigns. Participants noted recent recruitment commercials show a wider range of career opportunities available in the military, including support roles. Men were more likely than women and enlisted personnel were more likely than officers to provide this response.

I remember the Special Ops [operations]; the big tough guys go on secret or covert missions carrying gear. I would think that would be cool to be a friend of that guy or marry that guy, not necessarily be that guy. They are transitioning now more into the [Service]. You can be an officer, be a dental hygienist in the [Service], that you can serve, and it's not all cool guys mode you used to see in commercials.

—Female Officer

... They are doing a better job of showing [a] wide range of career opportunities; they had a marketing class that came up with the [Service-specific] campaign, the [other Service-specific campaign] ... and the videos of the [Service-specific special forces specialty]. I thought it was cool, but from a numbers standpoint, it did terribly. Parents saw kids going through explosions and kicking down doors. The [Service-specific campaign] and now back to [other Service-specific campaign]—it's about how you can develop yourselves and do a better job showing all you can do, showing more than kicking down doors or explosions ...

—Male Officer

The ones I saw—a lot of people ... work normal jobs. You might experience a deployment. You might not. The reality is most people are working support functions. I think showing that is important.

—Enlisted Man

Most of the [commercials] is made-up stuff. Even as a little kid, I played Call of Duty, and a lot of the commercials back then were unrealistic. A lot of it now is more realistic and more of what we do.

—Enlisted Man

3. Participants held mixed perspectives on whether their Service's recent recruitment advertisements appeal to both women and men

DACOWITS asked focus group participants whether they believe their Service's recent commercials and advertisements appeal to both women and men. Participants provided mixed perspectives, with participants in most groups reporting their Service's recent advertisements appeal to both women and men and participants in some groups reporting their Service's recent advertisements appeal more to men.

a. Participants in most groups felt their Service's recent recruitment advertisements appeal to both women and men

Participants reported recent recruitment commercials and advertisements are appealing to both women and men, noting recent commercials are more gender inclusive and feature a variety of occupational specialties, rather than only combat arms occupational specialties like previous recruitment commercials. Participants indicated highlighting noncombat specialties may be more appealing to women who are considering joining the military.

The one I recently saw was more inclusive... the purpose of the commercial was about individuality. It was about what you can do, not what the team can do. The most recent commercial had 10 different people, 5 seconds each and [Service-specific campaign]. They all had different jobs, men and women, different races. It seemed like it was trying to recruit for anyone and everyone. I had a friend in that commercial, a female aviator ...; they had her saying something. Compared to the commercials I saw 10 years ago, they are trying more to reach a wider audience than the previous ones where it was [Special Operations] guys running around.

—Female Officer

The last two that I saw were very appealing to both men and women because it depicts doing a parade, with old vets marching in the parade, and little kids on the side looking at them, and it inspired them to be that and go through the process to where they are the ones that are in the parade.

—Male Officer

I saw one that included a female [Service member], and I think that would appeal to them. When I was in Ohio recruiting, many didn't know about it.

—Enlisted Man

A big one they advertised was the all-female pilot flyover [for the Super Bowl]. That was a big one that was [Service-wide], showed that women can do what the men do and the empowerment of women. Women pilots are still a small number in the [aviation] community, but it spoke heavily when that picture went around.

—Female Officer

The [Service] has been strategic with ensuring posters [are gender inclusive]. I was in the bathroom stall, and I counted there was five females in different jobs, and there was only four men on the poster. What?! If only that was the real [Service]! It's very strategic in their planning for advertising even within the [Service] and the military in general. They are doing a good job portraying that to civilian life as well.

—Female Officer

b. Participants in some groups felt their Service's recent advertisements are more appealing to men

Participants in some groups reported that recent recruitment advertisements and commercials are more appealing to men, noting that many commercials still focus solely on combat occupational specialties and that women are still underrepresented in recruitment advertisements. Women were more likely than men, enlisted personnel were more likely than officers, and respondents from one Service were more likely to provide this response.

I feel like it appeals way more towards males than anyone else. ... It's that "bang, bang, shoot them up"; people get excited about it. The adrenaline behind that. I don't think females necessarily are attracted to that as in they would want to do that, pick up a gun and start shooting.

—Enlisted Man

I think it appeals more to men. ... With the [combat occupational specialties], generally men will be more inclined to want to be in those positions. Some women want to go and kick down doors, but generally speaking, I think it appeals to men more.

—Male Officer

I've never seen someone that represents us in the commercials. Just the juice heads. It appeals to the men more.

—Enlisted Woman

It appeals more to guys in the mud. You could still have the female it appeals to. USAA [United Services Automobile Association] has great communications. They show how you could be both in and out of uniform, and that has resonated with me more than the [Service] commercials.

—Female Officer

G. Factors That Encourage Retention

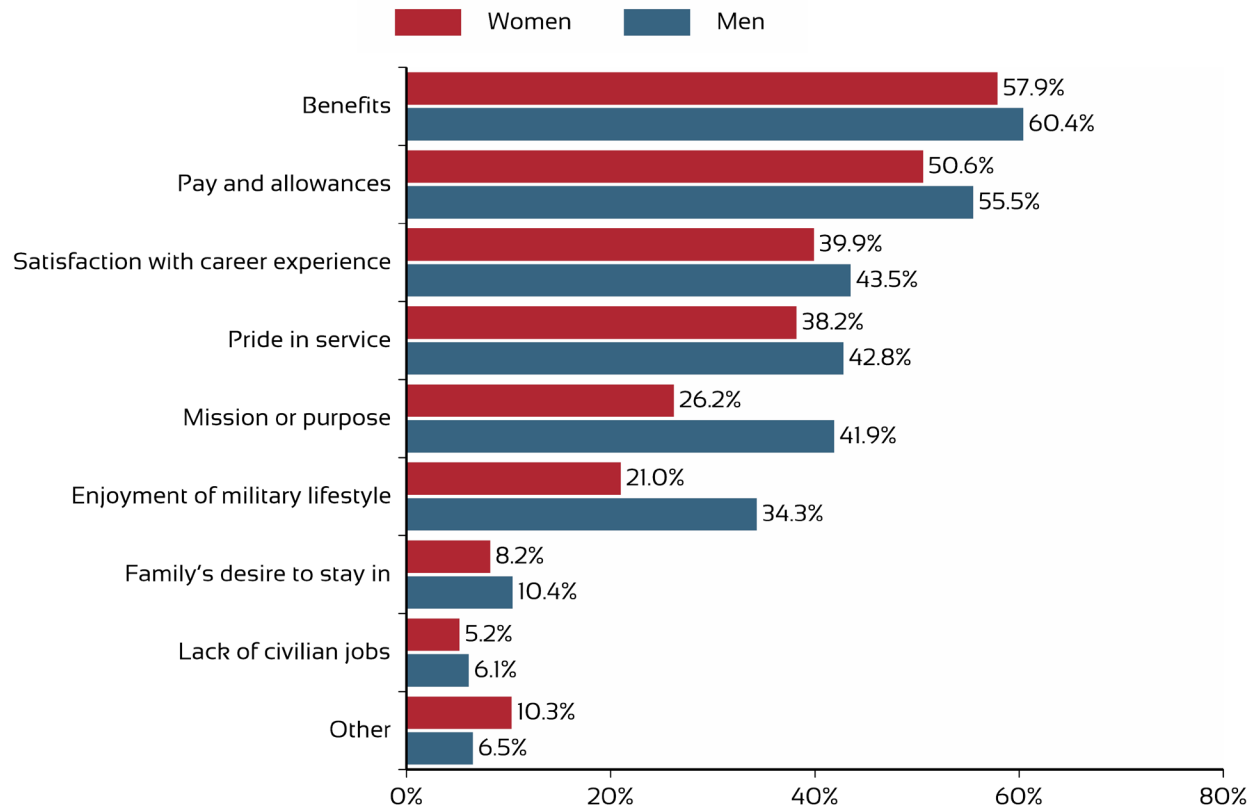
DACOWITS asked focus group participants about the factors that might encourage them or someone like them to stay in the military beyond their current service obligation. Participants in most groups reported military benefits as a factor that encourages retention, while participants in some groups reported that options to increase geographic stability and supporting Service members' family life could help improve retention. DACOWITS also asked focus group participants if the factors that encourage women and men to stay in the military are similar or different. Participants in most groups indicated the factors that encourage women and men to stay in the military are different, while participants in some groups highlighted similar factors that encourage retention among women and men.

By a show of raised hands, 49 percent of female participants and 55 percent of male participants indicated they had planned to stay in the military beyond their initial service obligation when they first joined. By another show of hands, 52 percent of female participants and 55 percent of male participants indicated they planned to stay beyond their current service obligation. DACOWITS also asked focus group participants to share their career intentions for remaining in the military on the mini-survey (see Appendix B for the mini-survey instrument and Appendix B.1. for the full mini-survey results). Twenty-three percent of female participants and 17 percent of male participants reported they probably or definitely planned to leave their Service at the completion of their current Service obligation.

On the mini-survey, DACOWITS asked participants to identify what specific factors influenced their decision to stay beyond their initial or current service obligation (if applicable).⁴ A little over half the participants highlighted military benefits (such as medical, educational, commissary and exchange stores, and Veterans Affairs home loans) and pay and allowances as reasons they decided to stay in the military. A greater proportion of men indicated they were motivated to stay in the military by mission or purpose and enjoyment of military lifestyle as compared with women. Figure 2.2 provides additional information on factors that encouraged participants to stay in the military by gender.

⁴ Participants were given the option to select "I do not plan to stay beyond my obligation" as a response.

Figure 2.2 Factors That Influenced Participants to Stay in Military, by Gender



Note: Participants were asked to select all responses that apply; therefore, percentages do not sum to 100. The response option "I do not plan to stay beyond my current obligation" is not included in this figure. Source: DACOWITS mini-survey (data from all focus groups)

1. Participants in most groups reported military benefits as an encouraging factor for retention but suggested increased pay would improve retention

Participants cited benefits associated with military service as factors that encourage them to remain in the military, including educational benefits they can use to pursue a degree at no cost or pass on to their children, stable housing, medical benefits, retirement benefits such as a pension, and reproductive health benefits. However, participants also reported that increased pay would help improve retention further.

When I first came in, I didn't plan to stay. I planned to do four years and get out. My first duty station, I had camaraderie; I had a mission and purpose. There was a lack of [civilian] jobs; [I thought] what will I do if I get out to support my family? There's the stability, and being enlisted, it's a lot harder than coming in and being [an] officer; the pay gap is substantial. A couple years progressed, and I started making more money; I had benefits. That is what kept me in after the initial service obligation, the benefits and stability. Now 15 years later, I can see the light at the end of the tunnel; that is what pushed me beyond the enlistments; it was retirement for sure....

—Male Officer

With the reasons to stay in, it's the education benefits and being able to give it to your kids and spouse. That wasn't the reason I stayed in, but it's an added bonus to give kids your GI bill so they can go to school.

—Male Officer

... I would say more money. I don't think we get paid enough in general. We are 24/7; we get awesome benefits, but I think more money. Especially because we are behind the curve in the more technical aspects, so we need more money.

—Enlisted Woman

The education benefits keep me going on, like transferring my GI bill to my little girl. Retirement pay is also keeping me going and knowing my child's college is going to be paid for.

—Enlisted Woman

I consider my service obligation 20 years, so to encourage people to stay past 20 is what I want to talk about, and it's money. There are increased responsibilities for [noncommissioned officers], but the only person who gets paid additional money is the [leadership rank in specific Service]? Different ranks or communities have [noncommissioned officers] as the first one in, last one to leave; it's something that goes along with the job, but the pay doesn't change. At that point, you've completed your obligation. So what is here to keep you going? Not just going because you have nothing else to do but because retaining those who really do want to do the job matters. There becomes a point where it's the job or it's my family and spending time with them. What [noncommissioned officer] can't get out and make more money than staying in? There has to be something there for increasing pay for [noncommissioned officers] or just a complete overhaul of pay.

—Enlisted Woman

Education benefits. They paid for me to go to school. Plus, depending on where you're at in your life, healthcare considerations for your kids and spouse might be important. Having to take \$1K out of pocket to pay for healthcare is bad.

—Male Officer

The benefits. There's no [other] job that increases a pay raise every few years. I can pay for my education and my wife's up to a doctorate, and I can pay for my children's education. For me, it was enough to stay in. Like I said, I didn't have a plan B. I tell people I love the military. I've dealt with discrimination my entire career and would experience it as a civilian.

—Enlisted Man

2. Participants in some groups reported greater geographic stability could encourage someone to stay in the military

Participants in some groups felt being able to stay in one location for longer periods of time would help retain Service members, especially those with families. Participants explained that frequent PCS moves can negatively affect families in the military, including limiting civilian military spouse's career progression and affecting children's opportunities to develop friendships during formative years. Participants also indicated frequent PCS moves may limit opportunities to build deep technical expertise in their occupational specialty, causing frustration that could lead some to leave the military. Men were more likely than women and respondents from one Service were more likely to provide this response.

Now as an officer, everything is greener over here. There is stability for my wife; we have a year movement group every 3 years. I have to choose where we're going to go; the talent manager may deny if we stay in [installation]. She [my wife] is trying to build her 5 years to get her benefits and get tenure [at her company], but in 3 years I have to move, the [Service] says. If I stay at [installation], it looks like I'm homesteading, and in the military they don't like that. They want you ... to have diverse account profiles, so every 3 years [I] have to uproot my family. It's a detractor for my family.

—Male Officer

Homesteading, staying in one place. I did it. [I moved] as a military brat, and I don't have childhood friends that I grew up with, and for my children, that's what I want. If there was an option to stay in one spot, I would do it. Even though they say homesteading is a thing, it's not.

—Enlisted Woman

The PCS cycle is rough. At one point, 5 years in, I was on my third PCS. My wife had a kidney transplant, and I had to appeal to stay here. You would have more retention. ... People aren't reenlisting to stay in their duty station; they are reenlisting for a broader opportunity where they don't have to worry. It's hard on families, careers, kids, and schools, so that would be a huge incentive right off the bat.

—Enlisted Man

I think the constant movement gives people less continuity at their jobs, and so it makes people feel less competent, and I think that could affect someone's decision to stay.

—Male Officer

3. Participants in some groups reported greater support for creating and maintaining families in the military could encourage retention

Participants reported greater support for developing and maintaining families could help improve retention among Service members. For example, participants indicated improved access to reproductive healthcare services and child care, more resources and supports for new mothers and single parents, better work-life balance, and better co-location and aligned time off for dual-military couples would help improve retention. Participants also acknowledged the newly expanded parental leave policy will likely improve retention among Service members.

Coming from a dual-military couple, me and my wife struggle to have our family life. We want to have kids, but our jobs won't let us. She works long hours; I work long hours. Sometimes we only see each other at night.

—Enlisted Woman

The biggest detractor is a lack of predictability. You have to plan around what the [Service] says. If she's career-focused [the spouse] and not able to have a career or a real job. ... When we want to take vacations when she has a job, it doesn't always line up when I can take vacation and her schedule. Most people do a shotgun wedding at the courthouse because that's the only thing that will work out. I went [without official leave] to be my brother's best man; I just left. They weren't going to let me go. It compounds. I want to have a life and have more say in my life and have a family.

—Male Officer

One thing that would encourage women specifically to stay beyond their commitment or the full 20 [years] is child care, especially for me with three kids. One is in school, but two are in child care, and we need something like [Service-wide] that provides extended-hour child care. My husband is also enlisted, and we have to jump through hoops to get our kids to daycare.

—Enlisted Woman

For me, having a support system for single moms. The [Service] says they want us, and they have the single [Service member] program ..., but most of that stuff is done during work hours, and I dare you to try to go to a program during work hours. So, for me, I am told to find someone in a similar situation, which is wild to tell me when I have nobody like me, and all these other people have groups like single [Service] program. So if I had support outside of my parents, I would like being here more, and I love being here. I love putting on the uniform, but I want to make those changes so other people like me will want to be here because it's hard.

—Enlisted Woman

Child care is a huge thing, and most of the policies I felt have been really great, but I felt we have not come up with a solution for child care. I'm sure all of us are on the women officers' Facebook page. They talk about the waitlist for the CDCs and off-base [child care]. They're flying family in to help with child care. That is not a problem for me here, and I was on the waitlist for 8 months, and honestly, I didn't want a spot in the CDC. I was hoping I wouldn't get a spot and would get the subsidy [to go off base]. I gave the CDC a shot but went elsewhere. That is an issue for families in general, but that mainly falls on the mother.

—Female Officer

4. Participants highlighted various other factors that might encourage someone to stay in the military

Other factors that participants raised that would encourage someone or someone like them to stay in the military included the following:

- ▶ More predictable deployment schedules
- ▶ Increased flexibility in using leave
- ▶ Better job satisfaction and job stability
- ▶ More promotion and job training opportunities
- ▶ More realistic body composition assessment requirements

5. Participants held mixed perceptions on whether the factors that encourage women and men to stay in the military are similar or different

Participants reported mixed opinions on whether the factors that encourage women and men to stay in the military are similar or different. Participants in most groups highlighted differing factors that encourage men and women to stay in the military, while participants in some groups highlighted similar factors that encourage men and women to stay in the military.

a. Participants in most groups reported that the factors that encourage women and men to stay in the military are different

Participants from most groups highlighted different factors that encourage women and men to stay in the military, including men being more likely to want to stay in the male-dominated military environment and less likely to be impacted by negative aspects of military culture such as gender discrimination. Participants felt servicewomen who are single parents were more likely to be encouraged to stay in the military for the benefits and child care options.

I think the culture thing is different. You don't see men getting out of the [Service] because of culture the same as women. Good men in the [Service] that agree the culture needs to change, but I don't think they get out of the [Service] because the culture needs to change.

—Female Officer

For females, having a child is more of a fork in the road [on staying in than for males].

—Male Officer

I've never been married. I've seen so much—I've never been interested in being married, but I felt like, it's crazy being around men all the time. The men have help. Their lifestyle is like, they go on deployment, and not all men, but that's like a break for them! For me, it's not a break. I'm in complete torture because I'm away from my child. For men, it's like "My wife does it; I'm just making money, and it's easier on deployment." "Wow, wow, are you serious?" Even when we are [getting back from deployment], he's sitting there. He said, "Ugh, I guess I have to help with the baby." "Um, you should want to do that! You should be grateful to do that! You should tell your wife, 'Let me take the kids, and you leave.'" There's a different mindset when it comes to male and female [Service members]. I talk to a lot of mothers that do deployments, and the anxiety of leaving your child is higher than for males when they are leaving their family. Men see it as a break, but women don't see it like that.

—Female Officer

When it comes to women, what gets women to stay—it's most women who stay because they are single parents. It's usually situational and because ...; the upside is that [the Service is] single parent-friendly with daycare because it's cheaper, and they are more understanding with single parents.

—Enlisted Woman

Yeah, some of the factors we didn't mention is the family piece and the unit cohesion piece. You feel like you want to stay longer with a unit that actually takes care of their people. If you look at females in the military, that feel like they aren't going to be taken care of. [Another focus group participant] mentioned deployments, and if you don't get to go on deployments, you might feel bored. So, females may feel like it's better to be with my kids, and for me, I have kids, but it's easier for me to leave them.

—Male Officer

b. Participants in some groups reported that the factors that encourage men and women to stay in the military are similar

Participants highlighted job stability as a factor that encourages both men and women to remain in the military and suggested better pay would encourage more men and women to stay. Participants

indicated the factors that encourage men and women to stay in the military become more similar as they progress further into their careers. Men were more likely than women and enlisted personnel were more likely than officers to provide this response.

I think the factors are similar [that encourage staying in the military], but the experiences are different, and that's what drives the difference between who stays and who goes. It's not the factors; it's the experiences.

—Enlisted Woman

Regardless of gender, there is a certain point where people feel like there is a point of no return, where people feel like they can't leave ... retirement, and more or less like social status that you earn. But prior to that point, like 10 years in to 15 years in, there are 3 to 4 years where people are really trying to decide. I don't know the answer to that one, but if you make it through that, I think the factors come back together for the two genders.

—Male Officer

I feel like similar. I'm a department career counselor for this building. I have sat down with 60 or 70 people who have stayed in or are getting out. Most of them have the same reasons.

—Enlisted Man

They're definitely going to be similar at the minimum. Base pay—a lot of women in my shop, I encourage them to get a degree, and a lot of them have [civilian] job offers of \$100K. You know what I'd encourage them to do? I would encourage them to go do it. Base pay is the indicator.

—Enlisted Man

H. Factors That Discourage Retention

DACOWITS asked focus group participants about the factors that might discourage them or someone like them from staying in the military beyond their current service obligation. Participants in most groups reported challenges balancing work and family life as a major factor discouraging retention. Participants in some groups highlighted other factors, including bad or toxic leadership and limited access to reproductive health services, which is more likely to discourage women. DACOWITS also asked focus group participants if the factors that discourage women and men from staying in the military are similar or different. Participants from most groups reported the factors that discourage women and men are different, while participants in a few groups highlighted factors that are similarly discouraging for women and men.

1. Participants in most groups reported work and family conflict discourages Service members from staying in the military

Participants reported military responsibilities often conflict with family life, discouraging Service members from staying in the military. For example, participants indicated many Service members have little time to spend with their children, and frequent PCS moves negatively affect families. Participants also highlighted instances when they chose their military occupation over other life choices, such as marriage.

Going back to another reason why [someone would leave]—some people may choose to get out because you barely have family time, to spend quality time with your kids. You feel like you did nothing; you didn't get to spend time with them. That's a big thing for me.

—Enlisted Woman

I would say it's not necessarily the money but the stability overall. Like, pilots can get out and maybe make similar money, or even less money, but they are spending more time with their family.

—Male Officer

I've never been married. I would retire from the [Service] and stop doing what I was doing if I could have a family and a husband. The [Service] did take that from me. Being a woman in the military, it's more challenging. When a mom deploys, it's a different battlefield than when dad deploys. You are around nothing but men; it doesn't stop. I would give it up. I have the children. I don't want more. I want to have a family where you can go home and spend your life with someone other than just being around coworkers, and that's what you have to expect [when you're in the military].

—Female Officer

When I commissioned, I had a plan to do the full 20 years. I could name all positions I wanted to compete for. At that time, it was just me making that decision as an individual. In the last 3 years, when you apply that outside of work life, that comes into play, similar to having to uproot family or convince a significant other they might have their entire family in Alabama, but I can't be stationed there for a couple years, so come to North Carolina or where I go after this. You have relationships. I have immense job satisfaction when I'm at work, but there are issues that would cause me to leave or not renew. It's not the job; it's the outside factors, that work-life balance that you don't think about when making that decision, when you bring in the family. It stopped looking as great as it was when you got in.

—Male Officer

Moving is extremely stressful, and you may have to take a few months to recuperate and then the children—especially for children and wanting to keep your children in an area longer than 11 months. Also thinking about job stability for your spouse. We don't have the same opportunities for those layers to be considered in my [occupational specialty]. We haven't invested money, from my perspective, across the fields at an equal rate to be on par with what we say we're doing.

—Female Officer

2. Participants in some groups reported bad or toxic leadership discourages retention

Participants in some groups attributed bad or toxic leadership as a factor discouraging Service members from remaining in the military.

The biggest factor is their leadership. If you look at where your toxic leaders are and look at the retention, units with very poor retention have very poor leaders. It's that whole job satisfaction and enjoyment. Do I feel like I'm getting treated like a human? And if people aren't feeling that, whether we are riding them or keeping them in the motor pool until 1900 [7:00 p.m.], they lose that job satisfaction. If no one cares about them here, then they will go be "Joe" on the street because if they want to walk away from their job out there, they can do that. People get out because of those reasons.

—Enlisted Man

Toxic leadership is one; I had been dealing with it recently—not where I am right now. In recent commands, people have been in the [Service] for too long, and they need to go. Their mindset, they [act like they] are so on board with the [Service's] vision for diversity and welcoming new ideas, new ways and processes, when ultimately, they are fixated on what worked in the past and bringing it up. It's a discouragement to myself and what I am worth and have to offer. That has caused me recently to borderline ask ... is my desire to make my way up and my impact as a leader worth the mental health of myself when working for toxic leaders?

—Female Officer

3. Participants in some groups noted limited access to reproductive health services could discourage women from staying in the military

Participants reported limited access to reproductive health services could discourage women from staying in the military, including the lack of healthcare coverage for in vitro fertilization (IVF) services and regular obstetrician-gynecologist (OBGYN) services. Women were more likely than men and officers were more likely than enlisted personnel to provide this response.

Here, there was no military fetal healthcare. There is no maternity care in [installation]. My healthcare for my pregnancy was at another base.

—Female Officer

For me and my wife when we're trying to have kids, we have to go through IVF. The [Service] does not cover IVF. It's harder for us to think about kids because it's \$30K for IVF, so that's definitely a factor.

—Enlisted Woman

OBGYN health for females—they have had to wait. For an OB [obstetrician] appointment, there were shortages on base, so they have to get a referral to off-base clinics. That's a uniquely female problem. In TRICARE there are not enough specialists. The [Service] and [Service] are not having an issue adequately staffing their clinics. ...

—Male Officer

The fact that you can't see OBs unless you're pregnant is an issue. They don't let us see a normal OBGYN. A lady got mad at me for asking for an exam after my checkup appointment. ... It's every 3 years, and if you ask for more, they get mad.

—Female Officer

4. Participants in a few groups reported limited opportunities for training and promotion could discourage someone from staying in the military

Participants reported Service members may have limited opportunities for special training and promotion, which could discourage someone from staying in the military. Participants explained promotions are more limited in certain occupational specialty fields, potentially making those Service members more likely to leave the military.

I would also say promotion rates in different career fields. I know the enlisted folks in some flying career fields—they say the billets are full. And if they're looking to promote and there is no space, I've heard people say they want to get out and that they're tired. But, I've also heard of people that love their job and say they don't care what they get paid.

—Male Officer

I'm approaching the end of my very first service commitment. At the end of it, I'm asking myself, what do I want to do? I extended by agreeing to go to [military specialty school]; otherwise, I could leave after this [commitment]. This is a once-in-the-world opportunity; only a few hundred people get to do it ever. It's a unique opportunity I couldn't miss. If I didn't get accepted, I would leave the [Service].

—Female Officer

Promotion rates are dropping, and for so many years, if they spelled your name right, you would get promoted. Now that promotion rates have dropped, I think that's discouraging. They don't see the opportunity to get promoted, so they get out.

—Enlisted Man

5. Participants in a few groups reported unreasonable body composition standards as a factor that could discourage someone from staying in the military

Participants reported outdated, unreasonable body composition standards could discourage someone from staying in the military, and it is harder for servicewomen to meet these standards because of their natural body shape and physiology.

It's morale, leadership, the height and weight that is way outdated. So ancient. My height and weight was 3 weeks ago before my PT [physical fitness] test. They wanted me as a 5'6" female to be at 164 pounds. When I take height and weight, I can't pass the scale. I pass the tape with flying colors, though. Height and weight itself is not diverse, if you want to say it like that. Women now have hips and fuller chests. The DNA shows it. I feel like my main concerns are I don't think the chart is well updated. It's not accurate results of how women are really taped, the way that we are taped, what we should weigh, our average weight.

—Enlisted Woman

The standards. The height and weight standards are something people don't agree with. Me and my sisters are from the south and are big boned. I encouraged them not to join because they won't meet the standard.

—Enlisted Man

6. Participants highlighted other factors that might discourage someone from staying in the military

Participants shared a range of other factors that might discourage someone from staying in the military:

- ▶ A lack of competitive benefits relative to the civilian labor market, including medical insurance and base pay
- ▶ Civilian job opportunities
- ▶ Lack of job satisfaction
- ▶ Mental health challenges associated with military service or burnout
- ▶ Risk of sexual assault
- ▶ Unit climate and culture

7. Participants felt mixed on whether the factors discouraging women and men from staying in the military are similar or different

Participants reported mixed opinions on whether the factors that discourage women and men from staying in the military are similar or different. Participants in most groups highlighted differing factors that discourage women and men from staying in the military, while participants in a few groups highlighted similar factors that discourage women and men from staying in the military.

a. Participants in most groups reported the factors that discourage men and women from staying in the military are different

Participants shared a variety of factors that are more discouraging for women or men to stay in the military. For example, participants indicated women are more likely to be discouraged by body composition assessment requirements that are harder for women to meet than men, the lack of female representation in the military, limited access to reproductive health services, fear of sexual assault, gender discrimination, and challenges balancing the needs of the family with the needs of the military.

Completely different [reasons]. Discouraging them to stay ... as other females mentioned in this focus group. The wife, the family, the in vitro fertilization, the height and weight, the morale, the treatment of the sexism, like how females are treated within the military versus a male.

—Enlisted Woman

I think to advance in this organization, to advance past Major, you have to have certain opinions to get certain assignments in order to advance. Whenever you see a panel of high-ranking [Service members], you see a lot of old White men, and so I think that keeps women and people from certain demographics from staying in because they don't see themselves in those roles. That can be a determining factor, not seeing the opportunity because it's not presented ...

—Male Officer

I think it's different for women and men. Women are the primary caregivers and have more burden in child care and are having to take off more work. So, in addition to having a kid, now you have lack of advancement in your career because of the absences.

—Male Officer

A lot of women get scared as far as things like sexual assault, whereas not too many men are worried about things like that. I don't know. I've heard about it a lot; through a woman's eyes, that's nerve-racking that would deter her from progressing and being in the [Service].

—Enlisted Man

A little off topic of how men and women are treated differently is that some of the things I say are a little invalidated. I had a sexual harassment situation, and I reported it, and it went nowhere, and my male coworker came out in support, and suddenly it was taken seriously. So that is very invalidating.

—Enlisted Woman

My husband does not think about the same things I do when it comes to things at home.

—Female Officer

I. Recommendations to Improve Retention in the Military Services

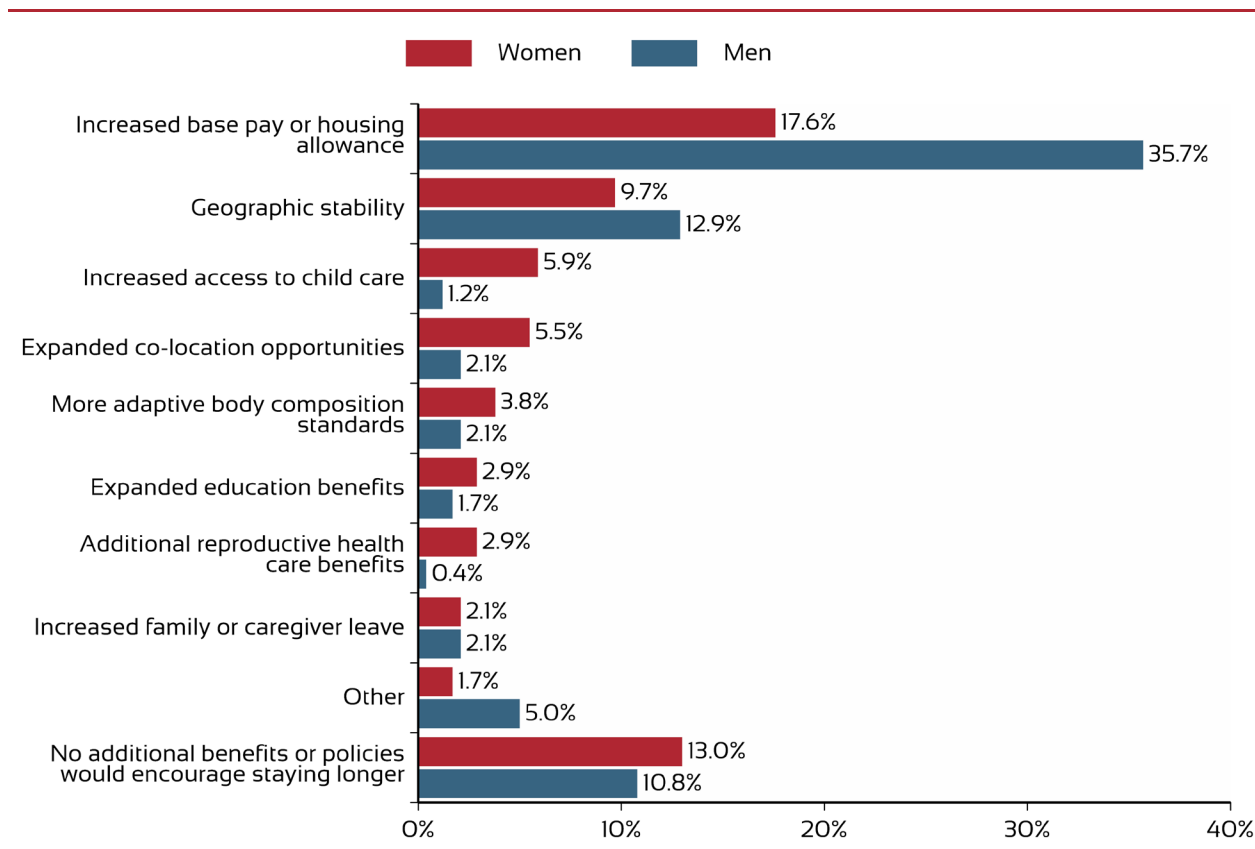
DACOWITS asked focus group participants what their Service could do to retain them or someone like them. Participants in some groups recommended their Service offer improved benefits, such as increased pay and improved access to child care, while participants in a few groups offered various other recommendations. DACOWITS also asked focus group participants what would improve the retention of servicewomen. Participants in some groups recommended their Service make it easier for servicewomen to create and maintain a family in the military.

In the mini-survey, DACOWITS asked focus group participants what potential benefit or policy would *most* encourage them to stay in the military beyond their current service obligation. Although participants were instructed to select the single factor that would most influence their likelihood to stay, about one-third of participants selected multiple factors in error.

Of participants who selected one factor, increased base pay or housing allowance was cited most frequently (27 percent of participants), followed by geographic stability (11 percent). A greater proportion of men indicated increasing pay or housing allowance and geographic stability would increase their likelihood for retention. For women, a greater proportion selected expanded co-location opportunities, additional reproductive healthcare benefits, expanded education benefits, increased access to child care, and more adaptive body composition standards as factors that would encourage them to stay in the military.

Figure 2.3 provides additional details on potential benefits or policies that would most encourage participants to stay in the military beyond their current service obligation. A slightly higher percentage of women (13 percent compared with 10 percent of men) said no additional benefits or policies would encourage them to stay.

Figure 2.3 Potential Benefits or Policies That Would Most Encourage Service Members to Stay, by Gender



Note: Participants who selected multiple response categories were not included in this analysis.

Source: DACOWITS mini-survey (data from all focus groups)

1. Participants in some groups recommended their Service improve benefits, including increasing pay, to improve retention

Participants in some groups reported increased pay and better medical benefits would make them more likely to remain in the military. Participants explained many Service members can make more money in similar career fields in the civilian labor market.

Simplest answer: Pay more money. People will do things for more money. The cost of living and food has skyrocketed, but this is not uniquely a military problem.

—Female Officer

Time is money. Money. The money. Increase pay. Not just \$100 or \$200, a major increase.

—Enlisted Woman

The benefits aren't the greatest; you get what you pay for. With dental and medical, you are calling in, and it's 1.5 months until you can be seen by a doctor.

—Female Officer

[To stay] past 20 [years]? A really big pay hike.

—Enlisted Man

Pay us more because in [occupational specialty], I can get out and make six figures [salary], especially with all the certifications we can get when we get in. So, we need more incentive to stay in.

—Enlisted Woman

2. Participants in some groups recommended their Service increase access to child care to improve retention

Participants reported limited access to child care is a major factor that influences Service members to leave the military, especially servicewomen and dual-military couples. Therefore, participants recommended the Services increase access to child care to improve retention, including care during evening hours for Service members who work night shifts or irregular schedules.

Yeah, even dual-military, they go through similar problems [to single parents], like trying to find someone to watch your kids. I know there are Facebook groups and stuff, and some spouses will do it, but you can't trust everyone. It would be nice to trust someone and find a person because you can't trust everyone, and the CDCs aren't open 24 hours.

—Enlisted Woman

I think some of this goes to the higher level. There's the expectation to continue to increase what we're responsible for. We're doing more with less. We are not getting more people. You are increasing the stress across the board; then we have leaders who don't know what it means to take on these responsibilities with children. Child care sucks.

—Female Officer

More child care options because if my career is going to suffer because I need to take care of my children, and if I can't promote, I can't stay in, and that has a bigger impact on my family. So, more child care so that we don't get looked at as unreliable because we have kids.

—Enlisted Woman

I've gone to multiple bases where there wasn't a CDC, and [women] may be working shift hours, and off-base child care was crazy expensive. Even as a father having better child care would be beneficial. I would stay in longer if I know they are where they need to be and are in a place where they can grow. ... It's hard.

—Enlisted Man

3. Participants highlighted other recommendations to improve retention in their Service

Participants made several other recommendations on ways to improve retention in their Service:

- ▶ Provide better leadership.
- ▶ Increase opportunities for geographic stability.
- ▶ Improve the care military doctors provide.
- ▶ Adjust and modernize body composition standards.
- ▶ Provide more mental health support, including better advertisement of such resources.
- ▶ Provide more opportunities for remote work.
- ▶ Improve support for single parents and dual-military families.

4. Participant recommendations to improve the retention of servicewomen

DACOWITS also asked focus group participants what recommendations they have to improve the retention of servicewomen specifically in their Service. Participants in some groups recommended their Service make it easier for servicewomen to create and maintain a family in the military. Recommendations included increased attention to career progression issues for pregnant servicewomen, increased access to CDCs and more support for offsetting the cost of off-installation child care options, extended timelines for pregnant and postpartum women to meet body composition assessment standards, and improved access to breastfeeding and lactation rooms.

I think more child care and lower costs would help retain more women, especially older, or rather more experienced, [Service members]. We have different values and are more experienced than when we first joined. When I first joined, it was about going to school, but now I'm doing it because I want to take care of my kids.

—Enlisted Woman

Flexibility in career progression. If you're going to continue on the aviation side, there is the golden path you have to follow, and it's inflexible. So, if you can introduce flexibility into that path, that would be good. They've encouraged the use of CIP [career intermission program] to have a child, but you're out of the [Service] not getting paid and not getting benefits during that time.

—Male Officer

Definitely child care; the availability varies widely by each base. Also increasing the supply chain so you can get things like women's flight suits.

—Male Officer

Lactation support. There are some rooms, but [they are] not available in all units.

—Enlisted Woman

Other recommendations provided by participants included addressing sexism and gender discrimination issues in the Military Services, conducting research to better understand what would encourage servicewomen to stay, and better leadership, including greater representation of women in leadership roles.

Chapter 3. Physical Fitness and Body Composition Assessments

DACOWITS has studied the Military Service’s physical fitness standards and body composition assessments related to servicewomen for several decades. In 2023, the Committee continued its examination of physical fitness and body composition assessments in focus groups, exploring how these two critical assessments and their associated standards affect women’s and men’s careers. The Committee also assessed what resources Service members use to prepare for the physical fitness and body composition assessments and maintain a healthy lifestyle.

The Committee conducted 16 focus groups with both enlisted Service members (E3–E8) and officers (O1–O5/W1–W5) on the topic of physical fitness and body composition assessments (see Appendix C.2 for the focus group protocol). This chapter discusses the focus group findings on these assessments and standards and is organized into the following sections:

- ▶ Overview of the Military Services’ physical fitness and body composition assessments
- ▶ Experience with physical fitness assessments (PFAs)
- ▶ Preparing for PFAs
- ▶ Participant recommendations related to PFAs
- ▶ Body composition assessments (BCAs) and standards
- ▶ Preparing for the BCA
- ▶ Participant recommendations to improve body composition standards and methods of measurement





When interpreting the focus group findings, consider that each Service has its own PFA. Though some of the Services’ PFA components are similar, the standards for each Service vary. Likewise, the BCA and body composition standards also vary across the Services. Focus groups were conducted in April and May 2023; therefore, participant responses about their PFA and BCA reflect assessments and standards in place at that time. To protect participant confidentiality, this chapter does not associate specific Services with individual participant quotes.

A. Overview of the Military Services’ PFAs and BCAs

All Military Services’ PFAs have components designed to test cardiovascular endurance, upper body strength, and core strength, as directed by DoD Instruction 1308.03. However, the execution of these components differs across Services. Each of the Services’ BCA consists of measuring Service members’ height and weight using a chart to determine body composition levels. If the Service member does not meet the body composition standards, according to each Services’ height and weight chart standards, further assessment is required using taping instruments to confirm body composition. Typically, Service members who are taped are those who are not exempt from the BCA and have exceeded the maximum

weight for their height. Table 3.1 highlights PFA elements for the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps⁵ and BCA measurement methods and frequency.

Table 3.1. Military Services’ Physical Fitness Assessment Components and Body Composition Assessment as of May 2023

Military Service	Physical Fitness Assessment (PFA) Components and Frequency	Body Composition Assessment (BCA) Measurement Methods and Frequency
 Army	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Six events: 2-mile run, plank, hand-release pushups, deadlift, standing power throw, and spring-drag-carry ■ Conducted twice a year 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Height and weight measured; if taped, men are taped around their neck and waist, and women around their neck, waist, and hips ■ Conducted twice a year within 7+ days of PFA
 Navy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Three events: cardio event (e.g., 1.5-mile run), plank, and pushups ■ Conducted once a year since 2021; can be conducted once or twice per calendar year as announced in October 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Height and weight measured; if taped, women and men are taped at the iliac crest; if body composition is assessed further, men are taped around their neck and waist, and women around their neck, waist, and hips ■ Conducted once a year within 45 days of, but not less than 24 hours prior to, the PFA
 Air Force	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Three events: cardio (e.g., a 1.5-mile run), core (e.g., planks), and strength (e.g., pushups) ■ Conducted twice a year or once a year if Service member scores an excellent on first assessment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Height is measured, and waist is taped at the iliac crest; body composition is calculated using waist-to-height ratio ■ Now separate from PFA; conducted once a year in Service member’s birth month
 Marine Corps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Three events: 3-mile run, planks, and pullups ■ Conducted once per year 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Height and weight measured; if taped, men are taped around their neck and waist, and women around their neck, waist, and hips; if body composition is assessed further, it is measured with scanner ■ Conducted twice a year; may be conducted same day as PFA

Note: Focus groups were conducted in April and May 2023. This table outlines details about the Military Services PFA and BCA elements as of May 2023. Some Services have revised or updated components of the BCA standards and methods of measurement since May 2023.

Source: DACOWITS focus group transcripts; U.S. Army, 2023; U.S. Navy, 2023; U.S. Air Force, 2023; Marine Corps, 2022

B. Experience With PFAs

DACOWITS asked focus group participants about their experience taking their Service’s PFA. Participants were asked whether they believe the PFA properly measures one’s fitness level and whether certain components are more challenging for women or men. Participants were also asked to describe how PFA performance affects a Service member’s career progression and the perception of leaders or others in their unit.

Ahead of focus group questions about the PFA, participants were informed that DoD directs the Military Services to design a PFA to measure a Service member’s basic fitness level. Focus group moderators

⁵ DACOWITS conducted focus groups with Service members in the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps. The Committee did not collect data from the Space Force because it was developing its fitness program during the data collection period. The Committee also did not collect data from the Coast Guard because it is under the Department of Homeland Security and not the Department of Defense.

noted PFAs differ from occupational assessments, which measure a Service member's ability to perform job-related tasks; participants were advised the discussion in the focus group would only pertain to their Service's PFA.

Participants had mixed opinions about whether the PFA properly measure a Service member's fitness level and reported some events were more challenging for women versus men. Focus group participants confirmed PFA performance affects a Service member's career, with more negative effects described for poor PFA performance. Overall, participants felt PFA performance affects men's and women's career progression similarly, with some participants highlighting differences by MOS, rank, or the selection board for promotion. PFA failures have a negative effect on a Service member's career, and female participants were twice as likely as male participants to report they have worried they would fail a PFA at some point in their military career.

1. Service members held mixed opinions about whether the PFA properly measures one's fitness level

DACOWITS asked focus group participants if the PFA properly measures their fitness level, and participants in most groups felt the PFA does not measure their level of fitness. Conversely, participants in half the groups felt the PFA properly measures their level of fitness or works well enough for the purposes of the physical fitness test.

a. Participants in most groups felt the PFA does not properly measure one's fitness level

Participants in most groups stated the PFA does not properly measure their fitness level. Reasons participants felt it does not properly measure one's physical fitness included the following: The PFA is not reflective of one's job responsibilities or duties, it is a general test that does not measure everyone's physical strengths, and it is conducted infrequently.

No. In no way, shape, or form does running [X] miles tell you how fit I am.... Me holding a [number]-minute plank has nothing to do with my job or me as an officer or my level of fitness.

—Female Officer

No, everybody is different. The military in general uses a one-size-fit-all. Even if they give several types of each component, they're all basically the same thing, and it doesn't meet everyone's physical strengths if you will.

—Enlisted Man

No. I think everyone in the military is imagining what it could be. The military is trying to reinvent it. Doing three events does not assess someone's overall physical fitness ...

—Male Officer

Just because you pass a test doesn't mean you are physically fit. But, at the same time, you still have to do some type of exercise in order to do it because there is a good chance you could fail as well. So ultimately it is on the [Service member] to pass the test, but it does not say if you are physically fit if you pass.

—Enlisted Man

For [MOS], it doesn't because when we're deployed, there are no places where we're running [that distance].

—Enlisted Woman

"[No], because we do it so infrequently. ... It doesn't mean you are healthy all year long.

—Male Officer

They [PFAs] lack frequency. You work really hard the month before, but overall, you're not doing much.

—Female Officer

b. Participants in half the groups felt the PFA properly measures one's fitness level or is an adequate measure

Participants in half the groups reported the PFA properly measures their fitness level or is an adequate measure of one's fitness level. Reasons participants felt it properly measures a Service member's physical fitness included the following: The PFAs are structured well and assess different areas of endurance and strength. Members from one Service were more likely to provide this response.

From a fitness standpoint, outside of combat effectiveness ..., my background is in weight lifting. They've structured it relatively well. It is endurance and explosive power for how you would test someone for physical fitness. I enjoy the [Military Service PFA]. I think it's a good measure of their combat effectiveness and physical fitness.

—Enlisted Woman

Yes. It does a very good job of measuring strength, endurance, aerobic capacity, power, and assessing a wide range of someone's fitness level. You are being challenged to increase fitness in one or more of those areas. It's a comprehensive fitness test; they did a good job designing it despite how we feel about some events. It's an overall fitness test to let you know where you are, an overall baseline.

—Male Officer

To me personally, it does. It's obvious when I'm doing preparation for it and when I'm at my peak fitness.

—Enlisted Woman

I think when you get into something job-specific ...; I think you don't need to do a certain amount of pushups to do certain jobs, so as a whole I think it's good enough. But if you dive into job specifics, I don't think it will show if people can do their job, which is important than running a [particular distance].

—Enlisted Man

2. Participants reported some PFA events were more challenging for women or men

DACOWITS asked participants if particular components of their Service's PFA are more challenging for women or men. Participants named various components that are difficult for both women and men to complete and/or pass. Participants noted upper body and strength components of the PFA can be more challenging for women, including pushups, pullups, and other exercises such as the deadlift. Other challenging components for women participants mentioned are the run and situps. Participants in some groups mentioned PFA components that were also challenging for men, including upper body components. Pushups, pullups, and the run are components participants most often mentioned as challenging for men.

3. Effects of PFA performance on Service members' careers

DACOWITS asked how PFA performance could affect a Service member's career progression and how leaders or others in their unit perceive PFA performance. Though a few groups noted how PFA performance could positively affect how they are perceived by others and how it could support one's career progression, participants most often described ways poor PFA performance negatively affects both aspects. For example, participants noted a poor PFA performance negatively impacts evaluations, eligibility for promotions, and school assignments. Participants also reported the effect of a poor PFA performance is the same for women and men.

a. Participants described how PFA performance can have an effect on evaluations, promotions, and training opportunities and schools

When asked how PFA performance affects a Service member's career progression, participants in the majority of the groups reported the PFA affects promotions and is used by promotion and selection boards. Enlisted personnel were more likely than officers to provide this response. Participants in some groups stated PFA performance affects evaluations and how they rank among their peers, an additional factor that affects promotions. Participants in most groups described how PFA performance affects Service members' ability to pursue opportunities that support their career progression, including school assignments, job placements, special programs, and training assignments.

Promotions

I can speak for the [senior enlisted rank] level; one failure derails us [from promotion] for 5 years. You could still go up against, you could have the best record, and if you have a bad day on your [PFA], you will get looked at but won't make the next rank for 5 years, no matter how well you did in other areas.

—Enlisted Woman

If you have multiple failures, your recommendation is removed. It hinders your progression in your career. Yes, it does. It removes promotion if you fail the physical fitness assessment. School opportunities and all too ...

—Enlisted Man

In all other aspects, your [physical fitness test] is your last differentiating feature. So, if you're the same in everything else, even PME [Professional Military Education]. Then they [the promotion board] will come down to your [PFA] score.

—Female Officer

Evaluations

On evaluations it will hurt. If you have a really good [enlisted rank], but he failed his PFA, he dropped in rankings and will be transferred with an MP [must promote], but he's still a good technician.

—Male Officer

One thing that's been told to me is, you take a bunch of people in a room who generally have the same schooling, same experience, same time in service, so what will set them apart is fitness. You can rack and stack people because it's individual to that person; it's an easy metric to measure them on.

—Male Officer

We all get an annual performance evaluation, and if you don't have a current passing [physical fitness] test, you don't meet standards for your performance evaluation. And, like how we said before, you won't get promoted if you do not have a current passing test.

—Female Officer

I've been in 17 years, and there is huge stigma around [physical fitness test] failure. No one wants that because they're scared of having it marked on their evaluation, and they'll be held against promotion. There is stigma.

—Enlisted Man

Other career opportunities

My command denied me attendance to a detachment I was slated for because I was on the fitness enhancement program. I was told I couldn't attend, and that's a loss of money and opportunity for me.

—Enlisted Man

That PT test, it's what you have to do to do anything. If you want to go to a school, it's "give me your PT card"; anything you want to do, it's "give me your PT card." It's the full determining factor before you can go."

—Enlisted Woman

If you are flagged, you automatically will not be considered for schools; that's my experience. [Service members] that are flagged will not be allowed to go to schools.

—Enlisted Man

There is no incentive to do well, but the special programs have special requirements. You have to have a good score to be able to join some of those programs.

—Female Officer

In terms of what you score, it doesn't matter unless you meet the standard. In terms of if you fail, it could mess people up if they are being considered for promotions, PCA [Permanent Change of Assignment], and PCS opportunities. I've seen outstanding [Service members] who got sick and failed the test, and their award package was taken from them.

—Male Officer

b. Participants in some groups indicated the effect of someone's PFA performance on their career depends on several factors, including their MOS, rank, and the selection board for promotion

Participants in some groups stated the impact of someone's PFA performance could depend on various factors, including their MOS, the promotion or selection board, and their rank. Nearly all participants who reported this response were officers.

Not even field grade, but for warrants it's 6 years on a timeline; I don't get extra promotion points; I don't go to a school that requires physical fitness points. It's career-based, based on my abilities to progress in my career rather than "she is the fastest runner." I would say it's MOS-specific and rank-specific. Where the enlisted get promotion points, on my OER [officer evaluation report] it says meet or does not meet [the standard].

—Female Officer

In my MOS, females consistently miss out on duty stations because of their [PFA] scores, over the males ...; because I'm chem-bio, so my [Service members] are out there right now running in chem-suits [chemical protection suits], so consistently my females are passed over for billets.

—Female Officer

It's difficult when you are staying outside the realm of [discussing] occupational [fitness tests]. Occupations can favor physical fitness performance; it's an unspoken rule. In infantry, the bottom line is fitness supersedes because it's the underlying trait that allows you to stay cognitively conditioned and be able to shoot when you are getting to the objective. If you can't do the baseline test, you probably can't do other things that are standard, so that's why it's favored. The actual effect, there is no adverse action as long as you are passing and no favorable action as long as you are passing your physical fitness test.

—Male Officer

It depends on the [promotion] board. Sometimes they care more about the [physical fitness test] than others, and some will look at [the tiers], and some look at the actual score. I think regardless, [Service members] judge [Service members] by certain fitness levels, and so I don't feel like I'm a worse leader because I can't max my [PFA component], but some people might.

—Female Officer

When we get officer packages for OCS [officer candidate school], if they are doing the bare minimum, if I am sitting on board to screen, I wonder if that is his mentality. I did look at [physical fitness] scores when looking at officer packages.

—Male Officer

c. Participants in the majority of groups reported PFA performance does not affect women's and men's careers differently

Participants in most groups reported women's and men's PFA performance does not affect their careers differently.

It's black and white on paper. If the command is doing it right, it's the same impact.

—Enlisted Woman

It's similar in terms of perception. Regardless if you're male or female, if your [PFA is] good, you're looked at in a better light.

—Enlisted Man

I don't think so. If a male fails or a woman fails, the outcome is the same.

—Female Officer

I would say no [difference] because the cost of failing a PT [fitness] test is the same across the board at that point. If you fail a PT test and go against another person that hasn't failed, they [the promotion board] will go with that person [who didn't fail]...

—Enlisted Man

I would say no on that. If you fail the [physical fitness test], you fail the [physical fitness test]. There are the same actions [taken].

—Male Officer

d. The majority of groups reported poor PFA performance negatively affects how Service members are perceived by leaders and others in their unit

When asked if someone's performance on their PFA affects the way leaders and others in their unit positively or negatively perceive them, the majority of groups indicated poor PFA performance negatively affects the way others see them.

Yeah, not just that you have to fail, but if you aren't an individual that has a stellar [PFA] or is in really good shape, there is a perception you are a dirtbag or a turd because you aren't out in the gym or working out. It baffles my mind that in my experience, ... some leaders in the [Service]... they get mad because the [Service members] are meeting the standard, but they're not meeting their standard (Other focus group participants nod affirmatively and some murmur yeah). So if someone is meeting the standard, they can still be looked at like a turd, and they might not get put up on a meritorious [promotion] board. There is a perception that if you aren't up to a certain standard physically, you aren't a standout [Service member].

—Enlisted Man

Yes. If you fail a PT test, your leadership will look at you like you are less of a [Service member]. Part of it is that you come in to do [physical fitness test], and if you are doing it like you should, there is no reason why you should fail a [physical fitness] test. If you are not coming to work and doing PT, or if you are coming to work and not doing PT, then you are just BS'ing around. Then you are a lazy individual. Those that do exceptionally well, if you are a stud and can max your PT test, they will send you to schools and to do certain jobs; it's a thing that happens.

—Enlisted Man

It seems like a judgment of character when I don't feel I like it is.

—Enlisted Woman

It adds to your unrecognized bias. If you're looking at two males that are running for [enlisted unit leadership position], and one of them failed the PFA, I might not want to give it to that person. Even though they both have the same qualifications. That would be ... you would struggle with that.

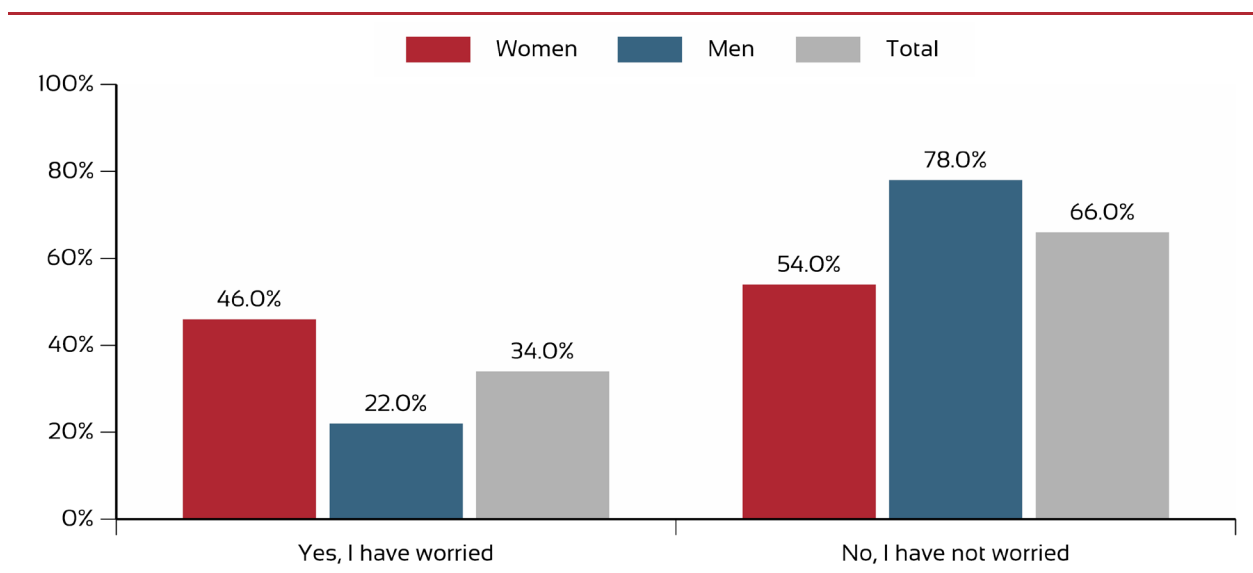
—Female Officer

4. Effects of PFA failure on a Service member's career

DACOWITS asked participants about PFA failures. Participants across all groups described a series of repercussions that could occur. The majority of participants stated Service members who fail the assessment are enrolled in a Service-specific physical fitness conditioning program. Participants in half the groups reported Service members could be separated from the Service if they fail the PFA multiple times. Other consequences participants described included punitive administrative action, the failure being placed on their record, and counseling.

Through the mini-survey questionnaire, DACOWITS asked all participants if they had ever worried about failing the PFA during their military career. Though most participants (66 percent) reported not ever worrying about failing the PFA, women were twice as likely as men to worry about failing (see Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1. Percentage of Women and Men Who Report Ever Worrying About Failing a PFA



Source: DACOWITS mini-survey (data from all the groups)

a. Participants in some groups reported the repercussions of a failed PFA depend on their unit or command leadership

When asked about PFA failures, participants in some groups reported it depends on command leadership and how it decides to proceed. Participants from one Service were more likely than others to report this.

The negative effects are based on each [unit]. The first time you fail, it's probably a verbal counseling and then putting you into certain programs, but other [unit], they'll go straight to paperwork and harsher punishments.

—Enlisted Man

It depends. The ultimate decision is up to the commander, but it depends on what rank they are, and it is different if it's the first failure or the second failure.

—Female Officer

It does vary from [unit] to [unit]. It could be a verbal punishment or a remediation to help you get on your feet.

—Enlisted Man

It depends on how the unit chooses to enforce it.

—Male Officer

I think the paperwork depends on leadership.

—Enlisted Woman

It's probably command discretion. I've seen some where it is, "You failed; you will do this," and others where it's, "Hey, this is an opportunity if you feel it's beneficial to you."

—Enlisted Woman

C. Preparing for PFAs

DACOWITS asked participants how they prepare for the PFA, including training, nutrition, or other ways Service members get ready for their PFA. DACOWITS also asked whether women and men prepare similarly or in different ways for the PFA. Participants reported various times they begin preparing for their next PFA and shared different ways they prepare for the assessment. Participants across the groups also had mixed opinions on whether women and men prepare similarly or in different ways. Participants were also asked to describe available resources to help them prepare for the PFA. Participants shared a variety of recommendations related to the PFA.

1. Participants reported they begin preparing for their next PFA at various times, ranging from year-round, to a few months in advance, to when they are notified they will be tested

Participants were asked how far in advance they begin thinking about their next PFA. Participants in some groups reported they stay ready by preparing year-round. Officers were more likely than enlisted personnel to provide this response. Participants in some groups mentioned preparing for the next PFA after completing a PFA test. Men were more likely than women and enlisted personnel were more likely than officers to report this. Participants in a few groups stated they begin preparing 1 to 3 months before their next PFA. Women were more likely than men and participants from one Service were more likely to provide this response. Participants in some groups reported they start thinking about the next PFA when they are notified of the date of their next PFA. Participants from one Service were more likely to report this response.

I maintain over the year because if I give up training, I gain weight. I have to maintain what I eat and what I do physically over the year.

—Female Officer

I have to start as soon as it's done to make sure weigh-ins are good for next time.

—Enlisted Woman

For me, my previous [PFA], I got the score that I did. I did the best I could. I take that into account, and I train to get better right after the recent [PFA] scores.

—Enlisted Man

As soon as I'm done with the current one. As soon as you look at that score, you can identify I need to work on this, or I need to work on this.

—Enlisted Man

I've always been a runner, so I run, but then you mix in the speed workout and, a month or two out, just start ripping out [upper body work].

—Female Officer

Three months. I'm working out then [for the PFA].

—Enlisted Woman

When my PT monitor tells me I have to schedule a test.

—Female Officer

The majority of people are preparing after the ... notice. I adjust my workouts. I work out outside of that time, and once I [get the] notice, I focus more on pushups and plank and whichever cardio activities. I've cycled through different ones over the years. You start preparing in those modes to make sure you are good to go.

—Male Officer

2. Participants in most groups reported they train for the PFA individually

Participants in most groups stated they train for the PFA individually, with some stating they follow their unit's physical fitness plan or train using resources their unit provides. Enlisted personnel were more likely than officers to report this response.

I'm consistent throughout the year. Because I'm in [career field], I have access to a human performance center that has a fully equipped gym with personal trainers. They have credentials; they come from Division 1 and Big 10 schools. You have to have CAC [common access card] access to utilize their facilities and programs. I utilize their program and facilities probably three out of the four to five times I work out. I am constantly pushing, and they are coming up with things that push me...

—Enlisted Man

Individually, I do workout in my off time. I don't have kids or a husband, so I can put in a workout. Sometimes you are tired and exhausted, and I do go home and sleep too. I don't have time to PT [physically train] sometimes when I have to do it. I never have a problem with it.

—Enlisted Woman

My unit pays for subscription to TrainHeroic. The trainer will program me a set training plan that goes into [the] app [to] tell me what to do. If I don't get to go in early in the morning, I can do it afterwards. We can both see the progress I am making. My unit is also looking at a different app. They pay for it.

—Female Officer

Pilates and yoga 5 days a week, strength training 3 days a week, and running 2 days a week. I have to separate my workout plans. But that's a normal every day for me because I want to be better for myself and the [PFA]. The [PFA] is just there to be like, "Hey, are you good? Yep, I'm good." But yes, I don't think I train for it; I work out because that's something that relieves my stress. A workday is usually intense; I'm getting 10 million text messages, 5 million calls, and that's [working out is] a stress reliever.

—Enlisted Woman

Our communities are different in [career field]. The community puts an emphasis on the individual maintaining their physical fitness and self-motivation; they expect initiative. I don't have anyone standing over me that I need to PT [work out]. There are higher expectations to score at least in the 80th percentile in each event [of the PFA].

—Enlisted Man

3. Participants in half the groups reported preparing for the PFA by changing their usual workout routine or training for specific components of the test

When asked how they prepare for their Service's PFA, participants in half the groups stated they prepare by changing their usual workout routine or training for specific components of the PFA leading up to the test.

I completely shift my style of workout from lifting because the endurance portion is worth more. I have to start doing more endurance training and repetition for things like pushups. It's a complete shift than what I would normally do; it's an out-of-cycle workout.

—Female Officer

So I struggle with running, so 6 months out I start preparing. I never stop working out, but then again, I'm pushing 10 hours a day working 5 days a week, and I got a 2-year-old, and my wife works full time, so it's a little bit difficult to wake up at 4 a.m., help my wife with the kids, and find the motivation to work out, even at lunch. So, 6 months out, I run a mile every day, and that only takes 10 to 15 minutes of time. I can come home from work and go do that and then do everything that I need to do. And then if I can wake up and do some pushups and situps for a few minutes, that's all I need to do to pass. If you can set aside 30 minutes a day to do a little something, I think it's very easy to do; that's one Netflix episode, so I think it's about discipline ...

—Enlisted Man

Stay active like they said; start alternating your workouts when it gets close to that, so you don't hit a wall on the 40th pushup.

—Male Officer

I have strong feelings about this. I prepare for the test I'm going to take. So, if I'm taking a history test, I'm going to study history and not literature. If I know what I'm going to be tested on the run, pushups, and situps, I do that. ...

—Male Officer

4. Participants in some groups prepare for the PFA by changing their eating or consumption habits

Participants in some groups stated they, or someone they know, change their eating or consumption habits to prepare for the PFA. Some changes participants mentioned include a healthy change in eating habits or limiting alcohol intake, while other participants described eating less or not eating. Men were more likely than women and participants from one Service to provide this response.

I go through the "I'm not going to eat anything phase" every 6 months. I know I can run because I run every day, and pushups and planks are fine, but when it comes to the weigh-in portion.... I don't remember any time in 13 years where I met height and weight standards, and I always stress about it, and stress also adds fat. The body holds fat because you're stressed. Everything we talked about are things I did to prepare for weigh-in. Preparation H and saran wrap, sauna suits, not eating before the weigh-in. Every 6 months I would do that.

—Female Officer

I will stop drinking 2 days prior.

—Male Officer

There are two levels of prep. The weigh-in and the workout part. I prepare for weigh-in by ...; I've never taken myself to extremes, but I do eat less. I never stop eating, but I'm more aware of what I'm eating and when. After the weigh-in, that's when I prepare for the physical fitness test. I usually run on the treadmill.

—Female Officer

Being mentally prepared is the most important part. If you know you can do it, you can do it. Other than cut back drinking 2 weeks prior to the test and lighter meals. That's pretty much it.

—Enlisted Man

I constantly think about it, but at the notice is when I start bringing salad for lunch and eating a light lunch, and I try to run 3 miles two or three times a week to make sure I'm dropping weight. I know I'll get taped anyway, but running is my biggest prep. Plank and pushups are a no-brainer, but the cardio event is most difficult for me, so I start running and building cardio.

—Enlisted Man

5. Participants in nearly half the groups described challenges accessing and using Service resources to prepare for the PFA, with many noting time during the workday as a primary challenge

Participants in nearly half the groups reported challenges accessing and using Service resources to prepare for the PFA. Participants described finding time during the workday to use unit or installation resources as the primary challenge.

[In my career field], it's the time. The resources are there, the [Service] is doing good with it. It's the scheduling with how busy we are, deployments, the quick turnarounds. The [unit] doesn't have time to make it a priority. The resources are there.

—Male Officer

The base gym closes too early. Because I go to school full time, I leave work, and I do school, but by the time I leave or my classes end, the base gym is closed. I pay out of pocket for a gym.

—Enlisted Man

The base gyms. We have different schedules of classes. Thursday they have spin cycles. Certain gyms have TRX classes [suspension-based exercise equipment classes]. The base offers a lot of classes, but when they offer them, [Service members] aren't able to go because they're offered at 9 a.m. Then at 6 p.m., but you're trying to get on base to find parking. The base itself, we offer a lot of different resources. It's not having the time to utilize them that is the challenge. I as a leader provide time for [Service members] to do physical training. We do it every other day, an hour before work, or they can leave at 2 p.m. and do PT [physical training], then they can go home.

—Female Officer

In a 112-person company, we have 1 [unit resource gym kit] for the company. This other [unit] had 14 people, and my [unit] has 84 people [who] use it [in] one day. It's hard trying to work all those people through in one day.

—Female Officer

Some bases have different resources than others. My last base had a pool and low-impact exercise equipment, whereas here the base gym gets so packed and cramped, and you can go in and just be like, nah, I'm not doing this today because it's just like chaos.

—Enlisted Man

6. Participants in the majority of groups felt women and men prepare similarly for the PFA

Participants in a majority of the groups reported women and men prepare similarly for the PFA. Members from one Service were more likely to provide this response.

My husband and I are dual-military, and it's the same. We do mini-practice PFTs [physical fitness tests], and he just installed a pullup bar in the middle of [our] house.

—Female Officer

I think it's the same. Some people like CrossFit, weightlifting, or cardio; I think it's all the same. I think it's like, this is what the [Service] said you have to meet, and it seems like guys and girls do the same thing to prepare.

—Enlisted Man

My wife is in the [Service] and does the same stuff to get ready for the [PFA].

—Male Officer

When I was a [unit] leader at [installation], we had women, and they would present their PT plan so we could ensure they were meeting our intent to prepare for physical fitness test. They all followed the same trend; women were no different than males. They might have lifted less weight, but it was the same exercises, same training plan. It was pretty consistent for us.

—Male Officer

7. Participants in most groups felt preparation for the PFA depends on the individual and is not related to their gender

When discussing whether women and men prepare for the PFA similarly, participants in most groups reported it depends on the person and indicated it is not related to their gender. Members from one Service were more likely to report this response than others.

It mainly depends on the person; some people need to train more because their body is not picking up muscle mass as quick as others. Some people, it's harder for them to lose weight due to metabolism; it depends on a person's genetic and body structure. Some people have to prepare more than others; some people do it on the day it happens and pass with flying colors.

—Enlisted Man

It's based on people's motivation. Depending on how people, for example, we are only allocated 1.5 hours for PT. The equipment takes about 20 minutes to set up and then put it back. So all in all, you only get 40 minutes to work out. People have different goals and motivation. In your own free time, most of those people don't prepare for [PFA]. They do 40 minutes of PT a day, and that's it.

—Female Officer

8. In some groups, participants described differences in how women and men prepare for the PFA

Participants in some groups discussed distinct ways women and men prepare for the PFA, particularly noting women prepare for the test for a longer duration compared with men. Women were more likely than men to express this sentiment.

My husband doesn't have to run at all, and he can run faster than me. I have to get out there and run to prepare. He has that build and endurance that I don't have.

—Female Officer

Females have to train for pullups a lot more than males. It's a lot harder for females to be able to just do that ability, and they don't work them out most of the year, and so, in my opinion, females have to train to do pullups more than males.

—Enlisted Man

There are definitely exceptions, but overall, there are more men that can go out and run a mile and half without any training than women who can go out and run a mile and a half. Even when women in the military are there because they want to be in the military, there are fewer women in that group that can just go out and run that fast. I had a [male] friend who trained for 2 weeks and got a [maximum score] on the run, and I don't know any female that can do that.

—Female Officer

For me, I had to change my whole diet. My friend, he can eat whatever he wants and do the [PFA]. He can have a Bang [energy drink] in the morning and be fine. To have a great [PFA], I have to change my whole entire diet; I have to have a regimen. If I eat like my friend, I probably would do my worst.

—Enlisted Woman

9. Participants described several resources available to help them prepare for the PFA

When asked what resources are available to help them prepare for the PFA, participants in nearly half the groups reported having access to one or more of the following resources:

- ▶ Fitness coach or trainer
- ▶ Gym or workout equipment available at their unit
- ▶ A nutritionist or nutritional resources
- ▶ Fitness programs or classes offered by their Service

Officers were more likely than enlisted personnel to describe having the gym or workout equipment available at their unit as a resource. Participants in some groups reported having access to one or more of the following resources:

- ▶ Physical therapy
- ▶ The track or running trails on the installation
- ▶ Unit-level training sessions

Officers were more likely than enlisted personnel to report having the track or running trails on the installation as a resource. Members from one Service mentioned having unit training sessions as a resource more often than others.

10. Participants desired additional resources related to PFA preparation and/or general health and nutrition

DACOWITS asked participants if there were additional resources they wish their Service provided related to the PFA or general health and nutrition. Participants named several resources, including expanded hours for installation fitness centers and fitness classes and better access to personal trainers.

We don't have a gym open 24/7. The [installation] gym is not even open on weekends because of so few people to keep it open. We were leveraging [Service] students to stand duty and check IDs. We had to close it one day and on the weekends.

—Male Officer

Open the base [gyms] longer and Monday through Sunday. I know they have to pay people, and it sucks to work Sunday, but sometimes my one day off is a Sunday, and if the gym isn't open, I can't work out.

—Female Officer

Although most groups reported having a nutritionist as a resource, several groups wished their Service provided more education related to nutrition. Participants who expressed this desire were all enlisted personnel.

I think it would be smart if we had an actual nutritionist or someone who was able to do some kind of weightlifting or fitness program. That way, if someone fails a fitness test, they could actually be directed to someone who has real education rather than just [another Service member] telling someone to stop eating X and to run.

—Enlisted Man

Nutrition should be taught and trained by commands. It's a massive area that is constantly evolving. It would help dissuade people from going on fad crash diets because there are healthier ways to lose weight and not negatively impact your body.

—Enlisted Man

To have more than one nutritionist. [For us] that is out in [military hospital]. That one is the only place you can head to. There is not any in [installation], not sure in [installation]. They don't have anyone in [installation], so it's just at the hospital is the only one that has it. In order for you to make an appointment there, it's an hour there and an hour back [driving time].

—Enlisted Woman

Nutrition. I think it's some of the worst quality food available to us. Some of the guys come in every day to eat. Every Saturday, they're eating pizza, potatoes, buttered potatoes, and, throughout the week, it's mac and cheese, low-protein, high-carb meals and two greens on the plate. We're cooking in horrible oils, and we wonder why [Service members] are out of shape. Just bad nutrition. The "Go for Green" thing [signs indicating healthy foods], it's not a very smart standard from what I've seen.

—Enlisted Man

Also quality of food [while deployed]. It is hard. I'm not a vegetarian, but I watch what my vegetarian friends go through. We were on a 3-month patrol, and we ran out of veggies due to the number of people eating food, but all that's left is dried pork chops and rice. So, you run out of those resources to practice the vegetarian diet. Plus, throw in you're trying to manage your dietary needs to reduce weight or become healthier unless you bring things with you. ... So, food access is a big one.

—Female Officer

D. Participant Recommendations Related to PFAs

DACOWITS also asked focus group participants what recommendations they would make to their Service about the PFA or the way physical fitness is measured. Participants across all the groups provided recommendations regarding PFA standards and how physical fitness is measured:

- ▶ Stop changing the standards and the PFA.
- ▶ Place more emphasis on completing the PFA and passing it.
- ▶ Separate body composition from the PFA.
- ▶ Train PFA graders on how to assess components of the test.
- ▶ Consider the effects of childbirth on PFA scores, including consideration of adjusting the standard for the first test servicewomen take following a birth event.
- ▶ Consider how the PFA standards relate to injuries.

Participants also provided recommendations on the PFA components, the frequency of the assessment, repercussions of the PFA, and approaches to physical fitness in general:

- ▶ Add an alternate cardio event (particularly for the postpartum assessment).
- ▶ Add a component more aligned to job capabilities.
- ▶ Consider not placing a PFA failure into the system after a servicewoman returns from maternity leave.
- ▶ Consider not including the physical fitness report in records to promotion or selection boards.
- ▶ Have a pass/fail test.
- ▶ Test more frequently.
- ▶ Have the ability to skip the second test if you excel on the first one.
- ▶ Have dedicated time for physical training during the workday.
- ▶ Work out as a command or unit.
- ▶ Incentivize physical fitness training more.
- ▶ Provide more resources to train and prepare for the test.
- ▶ Promote holistic health.

E. BCAs and Standards

DACOWITS also asked participants to describe their Service's BCA standards and assessment methods. DACOWITS defined body composition as their Service's height and weight standards used to measure body composition, such as body mass index, sometimes referred to as body fat. Participants were asked how their Service measures their body composition, how frequently it is measured, and how they prepare for the BCA. Participants also discussed the impacts the BCA has on Service members' career progression.

Participants reported their body composition is measured manually with height and weight, and then taping instruments if applicable. Participants in most Services reported men and women are taped differently, with men being taped in two places on the body and women have an additional third taping measurement area. Participants shared mixed experiences with whether their BCA was measured publicly in front of others or privately. In most groups, participants felt current BCA standards and approaches to measurements are not useful and questioned the purpose of the BCA. However, participants in some groups found the BCA to be a useful standard or measurement of body composition.

Failing the BCA will negatively affect a Service member's career, and participants listed various ways in which career progression is impacted. Participants reported the impacts of BCA failure do not differ for women or men. Generally, participants in most groups felt it was more difficult for women to pass their Service's current BCA standards in comparison with men. BCA failures negatively affect a Service member's career, and participants listed various ways in which career progression is halted. Similar to the PFA, women were twice as likely as men to have ever worried they would not meet their height and weight standard in their military career. Most preparation methods described by participants included changing or monitoring eating habits. Additionally, participants in most groups shared ways in which Service members use unhealthy means to lose weight in preparation for their BCA. Lastly, participants shared several recommendations related to BCA standards and the measurement process.

1. Experience with the BCA

DACOWITS asked focus group participants about their experience with their Service's BCA. Participants were asked whether BCA standards and forms of measurement are useful and whether the current standards are more difficult to pass for women or men. Participants were also asked how BCA standards affect a Service member's career and what resources are available to help Service members meet the BCA standard.

a. Participants reported their body composition is measured manually with weight scales and taping instruments; participants in some groups reported how women and men are taped differently

Participants stated their body composition is measured manually during the BCA with weight scales and instruments used to tape the circumference of their body to determine their body fat or body mass index. When asked how their Service currently measures their body composition, participants in some groups described how women and men are taped differently. Participants often mentioned men are taped at two sites—their neck and waist—and women are taped at a third additional site around their hips.

The males don't have their hips measured.

—Enlisted Woman

It's different [for women] because of their waist and hips. They have an additional measurement because of their body shape.

—Male Officer

If you fail that portion [height and weight], you move to the secondary measurements. It's neck and abdomen, and for females you do glutes as well. There's a third measurement for females.

—Male Officer

In-shape men struggle with this; they have too much muscle on their body. Guys are fine; if you have a beefy neck and a small waist, you are fine. For us, it's neck, waist, and booties.

—Enlisted Woman

b. Participants in most groups reported their body composition is measured publicly, while participants in some groups reported it is measured privately

When asked if their body composition is measured publicly in front of leaders and others in their unit or privately in a one-on-one setting, participants in most groups stated their body composition is measured publicly. Members of one Service reported their BCA is measured publicly more often than others. Participants in some groups indicated the BCA should be measured privately. Officers were more likely than enlisted personnel to express this response. Participants in a few groups also mentioned where BCA measurements are conducted depends on leadership. Participants in some groups reported their body composition is measured privately. Men were more likely than women to report this response. Participants in a few groups stated their body has been measured both privately and publicly.

It's not one-on-one.

—Female Officer

Mine was in front of junior [Service members].

—Female Officer

You are supposed to bring them in to a closed-off space, especially females, for the taping.

—Male Officer

It's supposed to be private.

—Male Officer

It's supposed to be one-on-one, but it's public.

—Enlisted Woman

Yes, publicly, but it depends on the command.

—Enlisted Man

It depends on the command and situation.

—Male Officer

We take it seriously in my command, so it's private.

—Enlisted Man

So when I went this month, they took me into a private room in the gym.

—Female Officer

My command, you come in and do your weigh-in, lift your shirt, and get taped, and then someone else comes in the room. It's private.

—Enlisted Man

Privately, it's one-on-one. You have to be the same gender in order for someone to measure you.

—Enlisted Man

We have experienced both [public and private measurement].

—Female Officer

c. Participants in most groups felt current BCA standards and approaches to measurement are not useful and questioned the purpose of the BCA

Participants in most groups expressed they did not find their Service's current body composition standards and forms of measurement useful. Women were more likely than men to express this sentiment. When describing reasons why their Service's current body composition standards and forms of measurement are not useful, participants stated they felt BCA standards and approaches to measurement are inaccurate, ineffective, and unrealistic. Enlisted personnel were more likely than officers, and members of one Service were more likely than others, to state these reasons. Participants in most groups also questioned the purpose of the BCA and whether the standards are about readiness, health, or maintaining a professional look.

I don't know what it serves. To make sure I look a certain way? Or to make sure I'm healthy? It doesn't do either. It encourages unhealthy behavior to look professional. It doesn't serve either.

—Female Officer

No. ... First, they're not close to accurate. They're too generalized. I almost don't see the need for it. In my career, I've had people who fail the BCA but outperformed me on the test [physical fitness assessment].

—Enlisted Man

The formula to do body fat, it doesn't make sense. Compared to last month when I did mine, I had dropped an inch on my neck. With that drop they are like, "Wow, she is losing inches," but I skyrocketed my body fat by 2 points. They are looking that you lost inches, but you are back up 4 to 5 percent over.

—Enlisted Woman

I don't know if that [the BCA] assesses whether they are healthy.

—Male Officer

With taping, not everyone tapes the same. She tapes another way than he tapes than she tapes. It's not fair across the board. I think the tape is not good.

—Female Officer

I think they are unrealistic. I will use myself as an example. I am small; I am a small person. I joined at 120 lb. When I got done with boot camp, I gained 10 lb from eating three meals a day and working out, the muscle weight. I'm 5' 3", and the most I can be is 145 lb. If I go over that, I'm considered obese. The most I've weighed is 155 lb. I'm still small, but I don't look like I'm 155 lb. To the [Service], I'm obese, and now I have to lose 10 lb because of their standards; it's unrealistic. Everyone has a different body type; I'm smaller, but for other women it's genetic, it's a genetic thing. If you have big-bodied people in your family, the genetics go down to you; it's an unrealistic standard for yourself.

—Enlisted Woman

No, because everyone is built differently.

—Enlisted Woman

It's the same standard for everyone, but everyone is different.

—Female Officer

d. Participants in some groups felt their Service's BCA and standards were useful

Participants in some groups reported parts of the BCA and forms of measurement are useful in gauging and assessing one's health. All participants who stated this response were men.

The tape test is for the masses, not a bad system; it's not a caliper, but it works for the masses. People don't like it, but if they get into a better and more accurate system, it won't be to their benefit.

—Enlisted Man

It could address their diet. If you pass the [PFA] and eat like crap all the time, if I weighed 40 to 50 lb more than I should and the [Service] didn't do anything to help me lose a few pounds, ... in that way it is important. There are more people who are fat than there are one-off power lifters.

—Male Officer

On the opposite end of the spectrum, there are some individuals that you would say, we should measure you because I'm concerned for your health. I'll be honest. If you can run the [PFA], but long term you are carrying around extra weight ... scientifically, we know that's not healthy.

—Male Officer

I don't think the measuring method is useful, but we should maintain body composition in accordance with the standards from DoD. I disagree with [earlier remarks about] performance; you can perform and be within the standards. Aside from the taping, it's acceptable.

—Male Officer

The BCA can be inaccurate in some forms, but if you have someone that fails BCA and passes the [PFA], I've seen people that fail the BCA and deserve not to pass, but pass the [PFA]. It does weed out people who do need help, so it's not just a checkmark. They're overweight, and it needs to be addressed. You have people who won't work out for the [PFA] because they'll go and know they can pass. The alternate cardio options are easy to pass but hard to get a good score on. They can pass cardio, get 17 pushups, even if they're not good form pushups. They do plank, and then they're done. They pass, but they need to be talked to and explained why eating well and taking care of your body is good for you.

—Enlisted Man

2. Effects of the BCA standards on Service members' careers

DACOWITS asked participants how the BCA affects their career progression and whether the effect differs for women and men. Participants described overall negative impacts to a Service member's career when they do not meet BCA standards and reported the impacts do not differ for women or men. Participants also felt it was more difficult for women to pass their Service's BCA standards compared with men.

a. Participants in the majority of groups reported their Service's BCA has the same effect on women's and men's careers

When asked if women's and men's career progressions are affected differently by the BCA, participants in the majority of groups indicated women's and men's careers are affected similarly. Enlisted personnel were more likely than officers to express this sentiment.

I think it would impact it the same because of the processes and paperwork you are required to complete when someone has failed.

—Female Officer

They get flagged the same way.

—Enlisted Man

I think it affects them the same.

—Enlisted Woman

No. The standard is the standard.

—Enlisted Man

If you're jacked up, you're jacked up.

—Enlisted Woman

b. Participants in most groups felt it is more difficult for women to pass their Service's current BCA standards

Participants felt it is more difficult for women to pass their Service's current BCA standards. Reasons participants expressed it is harder for women to pass include BCA standards do not take into account the effect of pregnancy and childbirth on a woman's body, women are measured at an additional taping site compared with men, and women naturally have more body fat. Enlisted personnel were more likely than officers to provide this response.

The female standard doesn't have any data for pregnancy and how long it takes to come back from pregnancy. That's something our standard has to account for that the men's standard doesn't.

—Female Officer

For women, it's more difficult simply because of the way that women's bodies are shaped and operate. But for women, like my wife, after she gave birth, everything totally changed, and that is not in her control. Her body does not react the same way to physical exercise and dieting, and I manage a lot of women in the [Service] that struggle with that as well.

—Enlisted Man

I'd say it's more difficult for women. They get measured differently in three places versus the male's two measurements. Women have naturally more body fat; it's science. It's a whole thing.... They have more body fat, so they are at a detriment for that.

—Enlisted Man

In my opinion, I feel like it's a little hard when we have babies. Our hormones are fluctuating, then the medication we take, which could also affect us.

—Enlisted Woman

It's harder for women to maintain the standard.

—Enlisted Woman

I think for women it's harder.

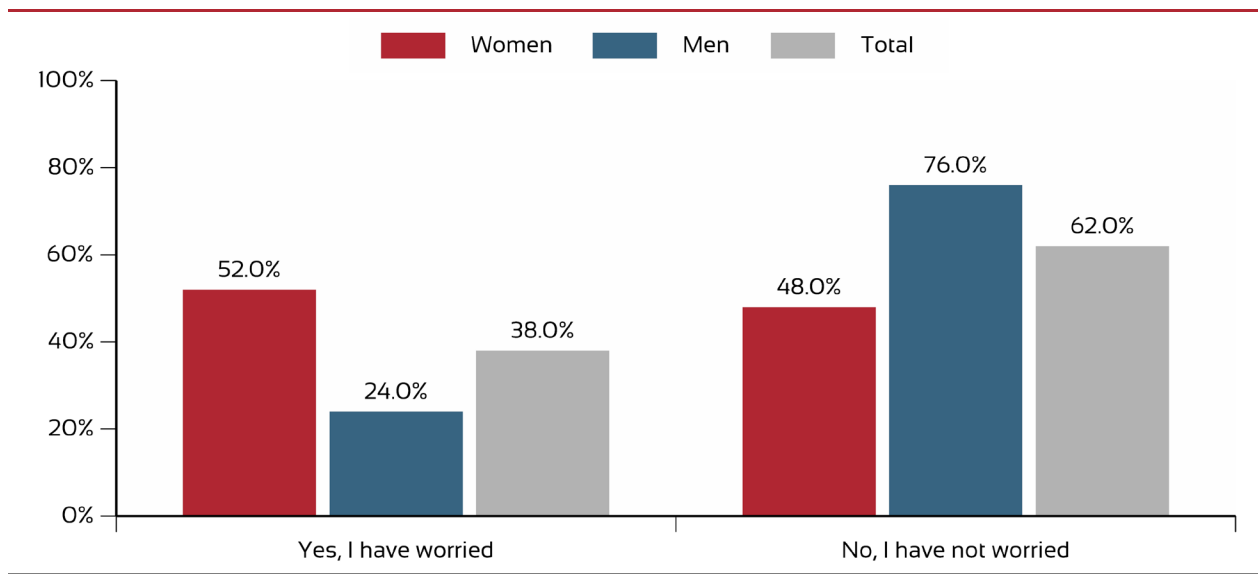
—Male Officer

3. Effects of a BCA failure on a Service member's career

DACOWITS asked participants to describe what happens when a Service member fails their BCA. Participants across all groups described a series of repercussions following failure to meet BCA standards. Similar to a failed PFA, the majority of participants stated Service members who fail to meet the BCA standards are enrolled in a Service-specific body composition program intended to help them lose weight. Participants in some groups reported Service members could receive a medical screening or see a nutritionist. Men were more likely than women to provide this response. Participants also described how failing to meet BCA standards negatively affects a Service member's career progression. Overall, participants reported failing to meet BCA standards affects men's and women's careers similarly.

Through the mini-survey questionnaire, DACOWITS asked all participants if they had ever worried about not meeting their Service's height and weight standards (measuring body composition) during their military career. Though most participants (62 percent) reported not ever worrying about failing to meet the height and weight standards, women were twice as likely as men to worry about failing (see Figure 3.2).

Figure 3.2. Percentage of Women and Men Who Ever Worried About Not Meeting Height and Weight Standards



Source: DACOWITS mini-survey (data from all the groups)

a. Participants in most groups reported a failed BCA negatively affects Service members' career progression in a variety of ways.

Participants described several ways failing to meet BCA standards affects their career progression, to include not being able to reenlist or get promoted and fewer opportunities for specific job assignments, training, or other education benefits intended for career enhancement or professional development.

You can't reenlist if you don't pass. If you want to reenlist, you have to meet the standards. If you're close and on the passing/not passing [threshold], then they want to confirm that you're passing so you'll be retested.

—Enlisted Woman

I have an NCO [noncommissioned officer], and he's flagged for body comp[osition], and he's not put in a position where he can train [Service members] because he's not looking right. That's how the [Service] assesses people; if you look like you are overweight, you can't have a nice [job], the job that you want. You will be put in the background until you can lose that weight and show them you are physically fit on the outside. They stress how [Service members] look on the outside, looking like you are fit even if you are not. You have to look like you are fit, and it stresses [Service members] out the most because you want to look like you are on it.

—Enlisted Woman

You can't make [rank] if you fail it.

—Female Officer

If you fail a PT test, there goes your TA [tuition assistance], schools, I had hoped to make. ... I can't go to a school; I can't do anything. My E8, he's about to PCS, and my Lieutenant Colonel wants me to fill the slot, but it's, "She is still flagged, so why should we?" It stops your career completion. The [Service] has put such an emphasis on PT and height and weight, you mess up on one, and you are done. You will just die there.

—Enlisted Woman

It's coupled together; if you can't pass the [PFA], if you fail your body composition, it can affect school assignments.

—Female Officer

Yes ... If you don't pass, you get flagged, and you are not eligible for awards, schools ...

—Enlisted Man

F. Preparing for the BCA

DACOWITS also asked participants how they prepare for the BCA. Participants described various methods they, or someone they know, use to prepare for the assessment. Most preparation methods reported include unhealthy practices such as restricting or limiting their food intake. When discussing the resources available to help Service members, participants noted a lack of resources or identified resource gaps. Despite these challenges accessing resources, participants most often stated it is ultimately the individual's responsibility to prepare for the BCA.

1. Participants in the majority of groups change and/or monitor their eating habits to prepare for BCA

To prepare for the BCA, participants stated they, or someone they know, change and/or monitor their eating habits leading up to the assessment. Common preparation methods shared include not eating, not drinking liquids, and crash dieting.

I stress out and starve myself. Not literally. I researched fasting and cardio. I do cardio before I eat and take my kid to school. My whole world revolves around PT and eating.

—Enlisted Woman

In the earlier days, like they said you didn't want to be called a fat body, so I would sit and stress out and not eat for days.

—Enlisted Man

I knew a guy, he's in the [Service], and it's more strict. Two to 3 days before his test, he starts starving himself.

—Male Officer

Some people fast right before a height and weight test.

—Male Officer

At the [BCA] notice, if I'm borderline, it's granola bars and tuna packets or a breakfast shake, that's what I live on. I cut back on alcohol; I gain in the wrong places when I gain easily.

—Enlisted Woman

For me, I struggle with weight, so I'm watching what I'm eating and watching what I'm drinking. If I had to tape, I wouldn't make it. I meet height and weight, but if I had to get taped, I'm [expletive].

—Female Officer

2. Participants in most groups shared they, or someone they know, use unhealthy methods to prepare for the BCA

When discussing how they prepare for the BCA, participants in most groups reported they, or someone they know, use unhealthy methods. These methods include using wraps to lose weight quickly and going to the sauna excessively. Officers were more likely than enlisted personnel to report wraps are used as a method. Participants in some groups also reported using, or knowing someone who uses, weight-loss pills or supplements. All participants who stated over-the-counter pills or supplements are used as a method were women.

I've seen males put preparation H on their bodies, wrap themselves in plastic wrap, and sit in the sauna.

—Enlisted Man

I wear my waist trainer 5 days before, so I'm within standard.

—Enlisted Woman

My eating pattern definitely changes in the months leading up [to BCA]. I'm not starving myself anymore, but I used to use the sauna. The [Service] used to have saunas at the fitness center, but they took them out because people were being hospitalized trying to lose water weight, and for me, when I did it, I dehydrated too much and rehydrated too quickly and threw up and ruptured my esophagus and ended up in the hospital for a week.

—Enlisted Man

I do everything for 2 weeks beforehand, like going to the sauna, changing my diet, taking water pills, eating celery.

—Enlisted Woman

People take weight-loss drugs at some of the clinics off base and don't know that they technically aren't supposed to be on these types of weight-loss medications.

—Female Officer

I lost like 40 lb over the course of 8 months and still had 1 [pound] to go, and I just straight up didn't eat for days and like, took sips of water, and got in a sauna, and lost a crazy amount of weight that way to pass.

—Female Officer

I know people who are worried when the height and weight comes up; people are doing wraps around their midsection and sweat suits to get ready. I don't condone the unhealthy measures to pass the test. In order to continue along and not have anxiety, they have to prepare for the test.

—Male Officer

The methods are different but depending on the level of waist that the circumference is, you could do a crash diet, which is don't eat anything for a long time and just drink water. Or wrap yourself in saran wrap, which works for 3 hours. If you're a big-waisted person, you take extreme measures.

—Male Officer

It's very subjective, the whole process is ... with women, you will see way more drastic stuff. Sitting in saunas, I have friends who sit in saunas for 8 hours, to taking diuretics. This is a weeks-long process going on. I don't have any children, so for me getting older wasn't—it didn't affect me in some of the ways with my friends who have had children. For me, my body structure, my waistline isn't all that. There isn't that challenge, but my posterior at 30 and 43 has changed significantly. I have been able to pass the tape; I haven't had any problems. But people are doing extreme, harmful, unsafe things ... everything you can think of that doesn't make sense. From getting plastic surgery; some friends get plastic surgery. They get tummy tucks done; they spend the money. Men too have had lipo[suction], so they won't have to deal with it.

—Enlisted Woman

3. Participants in half the groups felt preparing for their Service's BCA is the individual's responsibility, regardless of unit resources available

When asked what resources and support are available to help meet body composition standards, participants in half the groups indicated it is the individual's responsibility to prepare for their Service's BCA regardless of resources available through their unit. Participants in some groups stated the resources and support available depend on the unit. Members of one Service were more likely to provide this response.

I think if someone wants to do it, they'll do it and seek those resources out.

—Male Officer

Every unit is supposed to have at least two force fitness instructors, but if that's a [unit] of 200, it's enough, but if it's a [bigger unit], it's two [instructors] for 500 [people], and so it ultimately comes down to the [Service members] themselves and whether they have the drive and motivation to do what they need to do.

—Enlisted Man

Unless your chain of command is supportive and does what [Service] says, which is to let [Service members] work out on their own and give them time to do it. Otherwise ... it is our responsibility; it's part of our job. But if you work 12-to-13-hour jobs, no one wants to work out afterwards.

—Female Officer

[Installation] had that resource, and they also had nutrition at medical. They would build you a plan and actually make you a grocery list. But for everyone here, I tell my [Service members] all the time that if you need to learn how to run, I'll go run with you, and if you don't know how to cook, there are ways to learn. A lot of people decide not to reach out and ask for help or do their research for these resources. Let's be honest; a lot of people drink soda, eat Pop Tarts, and play video games. It's hard to stay motivated to actually meal-prepare and get out and do it.

—Enlisted Man

We have guys that have the time and are working 8-hour shifts and would rather play video games or go outside. Some kids don't care. We waste time trying to get them to care instead of taking care of operational matters.

—Female Officer

There are some units that have a team that will work with [Service members] to help them with it, and not everyone takes advantage of it. That's another layer that we use to take care of the [Service members] and help them take care of themselves. That's something that allows our [Service members] to succeed.

—Male Officer

4. Participants in some groups reported challenges accessing resources and support to prepare for the BCA

Participants in some groups reported challenges accessing resources and support to prepare for the BCA. Women were more likely than men to raise this issue.

We don't have those same resources available. We have to go to medical or go out of pocket.

—Enlisted Woman

Resources exist, but access to them is nearly impossible.

—Female Officer

It's not that they're not available; it's just hard to get them.

—Enlisted Woman

I've had friends be able to schedule BOD POD [body composition measurement system] appointments, but it's hard here.

—Female Officer

G. Participant Recommendations to Improve BCA Standards and Methods of Measurement

DACOWITS asked participants what recommendations they would make to their Service about its body composition standards or the way body composition is currently measured. The top four recommendations were for the Military Services to (1) reevaluate and update BCA standards, (2) use technology that more accurately assesses body composition, (3) provide guidance and resources, particularly related to nutrition, support Service members' preparation, and (4) train personnel on how to tape Service members properly.

1. Reevaluate and update BCA standards

Review the table to meet today's demand; it's not the same as WWII [World War II].

—Male Officer

The standards need to be reevaluated, especially for short people. I'm 6', but my shorter friends, below 5' 5", have had issues every time they get height/weight or body fat. There's a misperception about height.

—Female Officer

... We need to relook at the average [Service member] because they used to weigh less and carry less stuff on their back. We have more equipment, more weight we need to carry, so we have to weigh more to do that. They need to relook at the standards to change that.

—Enlisted Man

Based on the way we developed things in the past, the waist measurement is the easiest way to measure health.... They should have tiered levels. The waist measurement used to be the same for everyone, whether you're 5'8" or 6'0", and the shorter guy would fail even if he's fit. If they have those [waist measurements], it should be tied to the correct heights and bodies that exist.

—Male Officer

I think the standard should be reevaluated, the height and weight chart. Also look at a way to gain a better, more accurate body fat standard rather than taking numbers and looking at an old chart.

—Enlisted Man

2. Use technology that more accurately assesses body composition

If the [Service] continues to press the idea that someone's composition matters, like the percentage of fat or muscle or whatever, I don't understand why we can't do the body composition scan.

—Male Officer

Or they could, if they are so strict on fat and body weight, invest in the machines that tell you your body composition. Some people have heavier muscle mass. When I did the machine, my body was like 95 percent muscle mass, but this entire time I think I'm way overweight, not meeting the standard. When I actually got the full body examined, it's like, "Is this real?" If they want to measure people to what they actually are, they should invest in those machines. You have people that have heavier muscle mass because it's just how they are built.

—Enlisted Woman

Technology for that isn't that expensive or far out there. I have a scale that tells me fat content, skeletal weight, muscle weight. So, the [Service] could implement similar technology at a low cost.

—Enlisted Man

3. Provide nutrition guidance and resources to support Service members' preparation for the BCA

We need more resources, like more nutrition tailored to individuals. I went to a nutritionist to help me choose between a plant-based and animal-based diet.... If we are going to try to push for them, it should be more tailored than something general, like you need to run more or you need to eat better. I think [Service members] would appreciate that.

—Male Officer

There are different diets that are healthy, like the Mediterranean diet. Something like that could help rather than putting someone in a program.

—Enlisted Woman

4. Train personnel on how to tape Service members properly

It could be important to make sure the personnel doing the taping are trained on how it is supposed to be done. Some of the [Service members] who are taping are physically fit, but that doesn't qualify them.

—Female Officer

They need to standardize the program so that you go to a school where there is a set standard for how we do tape and people get trained. They have to get signed off like everything else we do. If I am a [MOS trainer] and I send people out the door who are jumping out of an airplane, I had to go to school, passed something, have a senior leader sign off that I can do it correctly.

—Enlisted Woman

Chapter 4. Pregnancy and Gender Discrimination

DACOWITS captured Service members' perspectives on the impact of pregnancy on servicewomen's career progression and gender discrimination in the 2023 focus groups. The Committee has been studying issues related to pregnancy and parenthood for decades. Specifically, the Committee asked Service members about the biggest challenges pregnant servicewomen face today, the impact of pregnancy on unit readiness and servicewomen's careers, and policies and resources that support the career progression of women who become pregnant. DACOWITS also asked focus group participants about the prevalence of gender discrimination in their Service and how comfortable and confident they are that leaders will properly handle instances of gender discrimination.

The Committee conducted 16 focus groups with enlisted Service members (E3–E8) and officers (O1–O5/W1–W5) on the topics of pregnancy and gender discrimination (see Appendix C.3 for the focus group protocol). This chapter discusses the focus group findings on pregnancy and gender discrimination and is organized into the following sections:

- ▶ Experiences with pregnancy during military service and impact on the unit
- ▶ Pregnancy and servicewomen's career progression
- ▶ Policies designed to support pregnant servicewomen
- ▶ Recommendations to better support servicewomen who become pregnant
- ▶ Expanded Military Parental Leave Program (MPLP)
- ▶ Prevalence of gender discrimination
- ▶ Impact of gender discrimination
- ▶ Comfort and confidence in reporting gender discrimination
- ▶ Participant recommendations to address gender discrimination

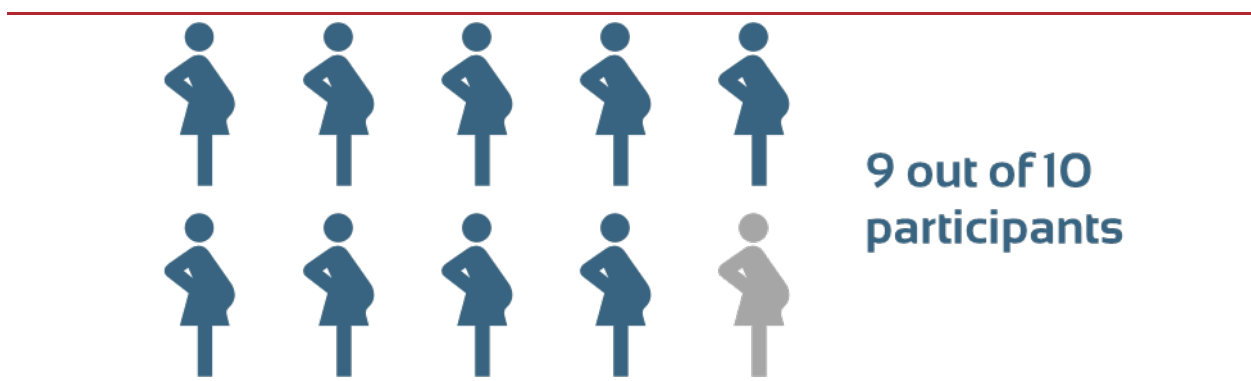
When interpreting the findings outlined in this chapter, consider these focus groups consisted of individuals with a range of family backgrounds and experiences that included single, married, and divorced Service members. Nearly half the focus group sample (48 percent) reported they had at least one dependent child. Both male and female focus groups were asked to answer the same questions related to pregnancy regardless of their personal experiences with pregnancy or parenthood. Similarly, all groups were asked the same questions regarding gender discrimination.

A. Experiences With Pregnancy During Military Service and Impact on the Unit

The Committee was interested in understanding the experiences of pregnant servicewomen and asked participants several questions regarding their perceptions of pregnancy during military service, the challenges associated with being pregnant while serving in the military, and whether servicewomen were treated differently after they became pregnant. Participants primarily reported that pregnant servicewomen were treated differently than nonpregnant servicewomen, and over half the groups discussed how pregnant servicewomen are stigmatized.

During the focus group, DACOWITS asked participants to indicate if they had been pregnant or had known someone who was pregnant during their military service. Hand-count data revealed the majority (9 of 10) either had been or had known someone who was pregnant during their military service (see Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1. Proportion of Participants Who Had Been or Had Known Someone Who Was Pregnant During Their Military Service



Source: Focus group transcripts

1. Participants described a variety of challenges pregnant servicewomen encounter

DACOWITS asked focus group participants about the biggest challenges pregnant servicewomen face. Participants described several challenges that negatively affected pregnant servicewomen, including being treated as though they were less competent or more fragile and being stigmatized due to their pregnancy.

a. The majority of groups reported pregnant servicewomen were treated as less competent or more fragile than nonpregnant servicewomen

The majority of groups reported that pregnant servicewomen were treated differently and described instances in which pregnant servicewomen were treated as less competent at their jobs, less valuable to the mission, or more fragile.

I would say they are treated differently when they're pregnant. I would say that when women are pregnant, leadership, they do care, or worried, about the ramifications. If something negative happens, the leadership worries if they will be persecuted so they have to make it appear like they're doing the proper things because if not, someone is going to come down hard on me. So, if someone has a runny nose, suck it up, but if they're pregnant, the answer is, will probably be, that they should go home. If someone has to stay late and you have someone who is pregnant and someone who is not, the not-pregnant [Service member] is going to stay. So, I would say pregnant [Service members] are treated differently.

—Enlisted Man

Right now, I have 2 NCOs who have been out on maternity leave. One had an emergency C-section, so me and the other NCO taught [the] class. This guy had come in to take it, and he came in and talked down to her because she was pregnant. At first, he was talking to her all easygoing and what not. Like she does know her job. Just because she was pregnant, that doesn't change anything. And when he came back in 4 months, it was not a peer-to-peer conversation, and when he found out she was pregnant, it went downhill from there.

—Enlisted Woman

I think they are. I had a [Service member] that was pregnant. We're [MOS]; it's expected that we are outspoken and able to convey information to commanders. She [this pregnant Service member] was outspoken, and the people she provided support to would almost treat her as if she was feeble and unable to provide support. They didn't ask her for support when they normally would have; it's like they almost avoided her.

—Enlisted Woman

I think naturally, yes, due to the nature of ... with safety, I guess. I kind of did know someone, an instructor we had back in the training command. You can't fly due to safety; she was filling an administrative role. She took her maternity or pregnancy leave; I don't know the correct term. If you consider that different treatment but it was for her benefit. I don't think it would be safe to fly when pregnant, so it's for her benefit.

—Male Officer

I have a pregnant enlisted person in my division, and she is 8.5 months pregnant, and today she was lifting computers, and I asked, "Should I help you?" and if she wasn't pregnant, I don't think I would have asked.

—Male Officer

b. Participants in over half the groups felt pregnant servicewomen were stigmatized in their Service

Another prevalent challenge raised by participants was the stigma associated with pregnancy. Stigma is defined by the American Psychological Association as "the negative social attitude attached to a characteristic of an individual that may be regarded as a mental, physical, or social deficiency" (American Psychological Association, 2023). The stigma of pregnancy in the military was frequently described by participants as ostracism within the unit, different treatment by leaders or peers, and a range of responses to accommodations. Women were more likely than men to raise the issue of stigma, and close to half the participants who discussed the stigma of pregnancy described it as originating within the unit or working environment among peers and direct leadership.

When I was pregnant, they [my leadership] didn't want to put me in front of the new [Service members]. That was never said, but I was like, I wanted to be back in the bull pen, and they were like, no, you have to be an academic officer. ... There is a stigma associated with it, especially when you are transitioning to new places.

—Female Officer

I've noticed female [Service members] have been ostracized when in their later trimesters of pregnancy. They are treated like they are useless or not part of the team because of what they are going through. They can outperform me on any good day, but just because they are pregnant, they are treated like they are second class.

—Enlisted Man

If you're struggling with daycare or with anything that deals with family issues, I always heard, "If the [Service] wants you to have a family, they will issue you a kid." I also hear that females get pregnant to get out of work.

—Enlisted Woman

Unsympathetic peers, if that makes sense. I have a [Service member] who is pregnant right now; she has morning sickness and problems with her pregnancy. She will go to sick call and will get days off to help her out, and people will make snide comments when she's gone and talk down on her that she's faking it. I have another pregnant [Service member] in our unit who is doing a lot better [with her pregnancy], and they will compare the two.

—Enlisted Woman

Informal treatment in [MOS]. In the third trimester, they are not allowed to be armed, and they are treated as useless. It is a regulation in the [Service], and it can be waived, but it doesn't often happen.

—Enlisted Man

The stigma. I have seen people express issues with the usefulness of a pregnant [Service member] and then the prolonged absence for how they can be used. Sometimes they will be moved out of the unit into staff.

—Enlisted Man

From my experience—I had a baby, and she will be 2 this year. I was in the field and found out I was pregnant. I had to tell my chief. That was embarrassing. I couldn't go to [a military exercise] because I was high risk. He asked me why I can't go, and I told him I'm fighting for a [my child's] heartbeat. I swapped orders with a guy coming into the unit, and my OIC [Officer in Charge] said, "I do not want a pregnant woman working for me."

—Enlisted Woman

2. Participants described several ways a servicewoman becoming pregnant can affect the unit

DACOWITS asked participants how a servicewoman's unit was affected when she became pregnant. Participants in the majority of groups described how pregnancy can negatively affect unit staffing and personnel assignments. Women in some groups expressed they felt as though they were a burden on their unit when they became pregnant. Participants in half the groups reported how factors such as career field, rank, or position can vary the impact of pregnancy on the unit.

a. Participants in the majority of groups described how pregnancy negatively affects unit staffing, with women in some groups describing how they felt as though their pregnancy was a burden on the unit

The majority of groups said pregnancies affected unit staffing and personnel assignments. Participants discussed how the loss of a pregnant servicewomen's capabilities due to doctor's appointments, safety risks, or parental leave could require a unit to operate with fewer personnel. Participants also discussed how a pregnant servicewomen's change to a limited duty status may require other Service members to fill important leadership roles, staff deployments, or night shifts. Men were more likely than women to provide this response.

For my office, it's the maternity leave that hurts us because once we lose a body, we are also pretty undermanned, so once we lose someone we are having to do all of the work and are expected to do more work with way less people.

—Enlisted Man

There is a negative reaction. You know, they get shorthanded on bodies and get stressed on the job because of how long our days are. So, pregnant [Service members] are limited in what they can do, so it is more of a toll on the other guys.

—Enlisted Man

They would take pregnant women out of the tempo for high-deployment teams. It definitely complicates things, and we worked around it, and some people may not deploy in all 4 years, and there are others who deploy twice as much as that. So, I wouldn't say—it's not that we can't work around, but it definitely does create issues because there are other members who have families who picked up that slack.

—Male Officer

When I was out in [international country], I had a pregnant female [Service member]. She was that Sergeant in that shop. ... When she became nondeployable, it impacted the unit. To lose one of your star Sergeants. I don't think anyone was mad at her, but you're like, "Oh no, we need the Sergeant to do that."

—Male Officer

My unit lost [duty] bodies. We had 20 pregnant [Service members] at a time. The cause and effect is we have more [duty staff] standing and less people coming in to fill those lost positions.

—Enlisted Man

In my case, she was an instructor, and we were already low on instructors; that's been a problem in training commands, the manning as far as how many instructors they have to instruct students. So being down one more to be able to teach students, I couldn't see anything else beyond that.

—Male Officer

Female participants in some groups described feelings of being a burden when they, or other servicewomen they know, become pregnant. The feeling of burden arises because they know a pregnancy in the unit can increase the workload and strain of operational demands for others. Female officers were more likely to express this opinion than enlisted servicewomen.

What does everyone say? "Aw man, we are all screwed now because this person is leaving; they will be gone for X months. You are hurting the unit." If it's not said out loud, someone is thinking it nearby. You can feel the animosity of how you are inconveniencing the unit because you are trying to have a family and a life. No one says that about Jones [male Service member] and his wife who has been pregnant the last 6 years because he is not hurting the unit. I want a family. I am not going to wait until I am 45 to have a child. I have seen that with friends of mine: "I can't slow down my career, and I can't get pregnant." But now they are 45, and they can't have a kid. They lost out on something they desperately wanted in life because the [Service] says it's not okay to hurt the [Service]. It's [expletive].

—Female Officer

It is [career field]-specific because if you're flying or you're a [leadership position] and your community is already hurting, you have to consider scheduling, and so they do degrade what the [unit] is able to do and put more of a burden on people that aren't pregnant. So, whether we can create a policy where we can backfill for 6 months, unfortunately in some cases, they [pregnant Service members] place a bigger burden.

—Female Officer

... When I got pregnant, they cut me from the [operational] schedule. It's an all-out stop because we only have one [team]. I know my [unit] is a unique place, but to your points when you're one of one ... it makes me feel bad because my unit is struggling now, but I didn't have an option [to help].

—Female Officer

By just being at the unit. I was at a [occupational specialty] unit when I was pregnant, and that meant that I could not deploy, and that meant that another [Service member] had to deploy for me. It's difficult because when you are part of an [operational] unit, you are a hinderance because they have to fill that spot.

—Female Officer

Being in a rapidly deploying unit, it affected us a lot; we needed numbers, and when people get pregnant, that's another body we don't have. People took it personal and made negative remarks about it. It was a big deal; it's unit-dependent. It depends on what unit you're in.

—Enlisted Woman

b. Half the groups said pregnancy's impact on the unit would depend on the career field, rank, or position of the servicewoman and leadership's approach to staffing gaps resulting from pregnancy and parental leave

While the majority of groups discussed pregnancy's impact on unit staffing and personnel assignments, half the groups said the degree to which a pregnancy affected unit staffing or readiness would depend on the servicewoman's career field, rank, or leadership position within the unit. Participants also noted variations based on how leadership approached the personnel gap. Female participants were more likely to cite career field as a contributing factor, and only women cited leadership roles as a contributing factor. Conversely, only male participants cited rank as a factor that would determine how a servicewoman's pregnancy affected the unit.

At every command, leadership positions are often undermanned, whether that's your senior enlisted, junior officers, senior officers. If you have women getting pregnant in those positions, that will put a strain on the command. At the lower levels, you can absorb it; at the higher levels, there is no excess manning.

—Male Officer

When I had a rock star Sergeant, and she became pregnant, we were happy for her, but now we have to train people to make sure they are doing her job correctly. If you don't, we are not going to be successful. All of a sudden, the whole unit goes to crap because this Sergeant is gone.

—Male Officer

It depends on what leadership does with the person. If they kept them there, and they are allowing that person to continue that job, no harm, no foul or problems. Yes, you have to cater to their needs a bit more, so be it! Do it! If you take them out, they are undermanned and hurting. They are shooting themselves in the foot with someone who is capable and qualified.

—Enlisted Woman

B. Pregnancy and Servicewomen's Career Progression

Participants mentioned a variety of factors that could prevent pregnant servicewomen from advancing in their careers. These factors included instances that occurred during pregnancy, such as being removed from meaningful or skilled work due to their pregnancy, and factors that affected career progression after the child was born. Examples of postpartum factors included the effects parental and convalescent leave have on performance evaluations and future promotions, the need to choose between having a career and focusing on one's family, policies related to fitness and body composition standards, and lack of child care. However, as with the discussion about unit readiness, some participants said pregnancy's impact on a servicewoman's career would depend on the servicewoman's career field, rank, or the timing of their pregnancy.

In addition to the focus group questions regarding pregnancy and career progression, DACOWITS also asked Service members to respond to two survey questions related to having a family or becoming pregnant and being able to advance in one's career. Similar to the focus group responses, survey data revealed the majority of participants believed it was somewhat or very difficult to have a family, and over half believed it was somewhat or very difficult for pregnant servicewomen to advance in their career.

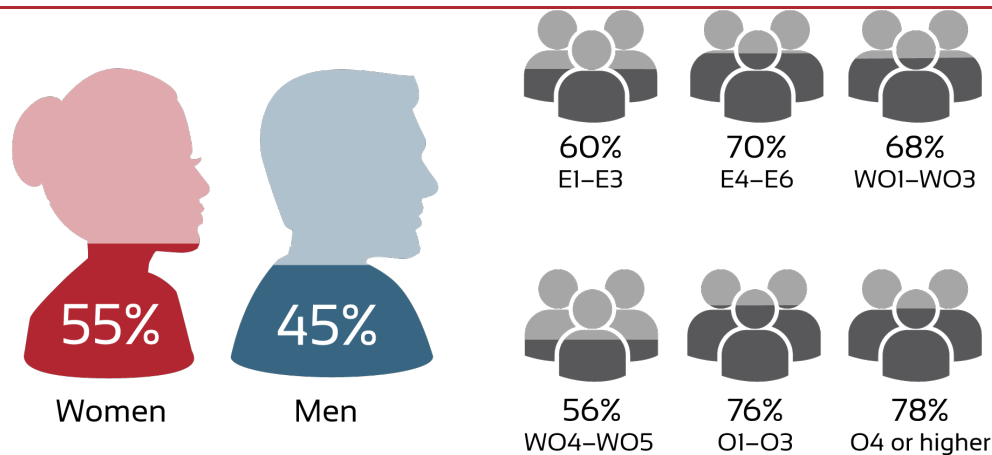
1. Perceived difficulty of having a family and advancing one's career

In focus groups conducted in 2018 and 2019, DACOWITS found gender and rank differences among Service members regarding the perceived ease or difficulty of having a family and continuing to advance their careers in the military. DACOWITS asked the same question⁶ on the 2023 mini-survey. Participants could select from the response options of very easy, somewhat easy, somewhat difficult, or very difficult.

As in 2018 and 2019, the majority of participants (71 percent) felt having a family and progressing in one's military career was somewhat or very difficult. However, unlike in years past, servicewomen were only slightly more likely than servicemen to respond this way (55 percent versus 45 percent, respectively). Fewer servicemen and servicewomen in the 2023 sample felt it was difficult to have a family. In 2019, 74 percent of servicewomen and 58 percent of servicemen reported feeling having a family and advancing one's career was somewhat or very difficult. Seventy-six percent of junior officers (O1–O3) and 78 percent of mid-grade officers (O4 or higher) felt it was somewhat or very difficult to have a family and continue to advance in one's career (see Figure 4.2)

⁶ The mini-survey question was, "How easy or difficult do you feel it is for the members of your Service to have a family and continue to advance their careers in the military?"

Figure 4.2. Proportion of Participants by Gender and Rank Who Found Planning a Family and Advancing One's Military Career Somewhat or Very Difficult



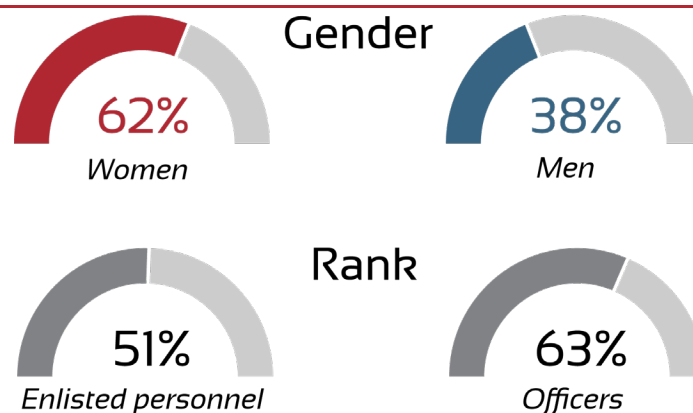
Source: DACOWITS mini-survey

2. Perceived difficulty of pregnancy and advancing one's career

To further understand the perceived impact of pregnancy on career progression, the Committee asked an additional question on the 2023 mini-survey. Focus group participants were asked to rate their agreement with the following statement: "Women in my Service who become pregnant are more likely to encounter obstacles toward advancing their career." Response options were "strongly agree," "agree," "neither agree nor disagree," "disagree," and "strongly disagree."

Over half of participants (62 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that servicewomen who become pregnant would encounter obstacles toward advancing their career. Women were more likely than men and enlisted personnel were more likely than officers to agree or strongly agree (see Figure 4.3)

Figure 4.3. Proportion of Participants by Gender and Rank Who Agreed or Strongly Agreed That Women in Their Service Who Become Pregnant Are More Likely to Encounter Obstacles Toward Career Advancement



Note: Enlisted personnel includes E1-E6. Officers include WO1-WO6 and O1-O4 and higher.

Source: DACOWITS mini-survey

3. The majority of groups described the negative impact pregnancy could have on a servicewoman's career progression

Participants in the majority of groups reported pregnancy hinders servicewomen's career progression during the pregnancy and the postpartum period and beyond. Women were more likely than men to provide this response.

In [my Service], there are three genders: men, women who never have children, and women who have children. I don't mean it in that way, but I mean it in a way that you won't be successful if you have children. Our commander has no children, no spouse. She goes home to an empty house every night. There's something to be said for that.

—Female Officer

Pregnancy could affect a servicewoman's career because it becomes a roadblock. They view it as a roadblock instead of trying to find ways to accommodate someone who is pregnant. They will wait until you have your baby; they don't see the potential in them being pregnant or let them have an opportunity to figure things out postpartum.

—Enlisted Man

I don't have a challenge as far as having a kid because I've never had one. I did get pregnant, I did. ... I decided to have an abortion (participant starts crying); I did it out of fear of not being able to move forward with my career because I did advance at a fairly swift pace compared to the average [Service member] coming up in the [Service]. I didn't want to get pregnant and then go on a pregnancy tour and then get held back 2 to 3 years from pursuing the ultimate goal for my career in the military. I guess that is a challenge. Thinking about how it sets you back and the obstacles you encounter in being pregnant.

—Enlisted Woman

Trying to get competitive billets in some MOS. I was pregnant and didn't plan it that way, so I moved and tried to get a competitive billet. Trying to advocate, and getting other people to advocate for me and to understand that I could be a new mom and be in a competitive billet was challenging. I was still able to do it, but it was still challenging.

—Female Officer

I was pulled out of key developmental [KD] positions as soon as I got pregnant. You hit your wickets to make you competitive to promote. You need so much time in certain positions, but I am taken out because I was nondeployable even though we weren't on slate to deploy. That was my first pregnancy. My second pregnancy didn't really affect me the same way. ... I was at [installation] for 3 months TDY [temporary duty]. I had already been to [advanced training]; it was already complete. But they [leadership] wanted me to go again. But I can't leave my kids for 3 months; my husband couldn't take care of them. I was unwilling to activate my FCP [family care plan] to satisfy a requirement I already completed. They told me if I don't go, they will give me a [expletive] job when I got to [installation] because all my peers can go. It's not just pregnancy; it is raising children alone. It is being asked by your senior rater what your husband is doing in his career. I have years of leaving by 5 a.m. and not being home until 6 p.m. Saying my babysitter will quit if I'm late again. It's 1 year of recovery after birth. It's not just being pregnant; it's family in general.

—Female Officer

Something that I was talking to someone about, she was saying it was frustrating and annoying because you're missing opportunities. No one wants to be stuck at [installation]; they want to progress in their careers and get out and do stuff, but they can't because they have appointments, and they obviously have to make that sacrifice. They do that, and it's frustrating for them, but to hit on what was said earlier, they're like missing, and they get pulled back in a way to where they aren't able to catch up to their peer group.

—Enlisted Man

I'd say it's afterward [after pregnancy], trying to get back in the swing of things; that's something that takes a lot from everyone that I've seen. They are looked down upon because they have a period after pregnancy where they are expected to get back in the swing of things, but it takes longer to do so.

—Enlisted Man

4. Participants in most groups said parental and convalescent leave has the potential to affect career progression and promotion because of lost time performing their job

The majority of groups discussed how parental and convalescent leave has the potential to negatively affect servicewomen's career progression. Participants noted how this extended amount of leave reduces the observable time a Service member needs for promotion and how the length of time away from work leaves gaps in performance evaluations.

Has anyone here been on a promotion or selection board? (No one raises their hand.) I haven't either, but I don't know if the board knows if a [Service member] was out on maternity, but if they can recognize that, that would be beneficial. If they see a gap in someone's record, that could impact their career. I don't know if they see it, but that is what I heard during my time in service.

—Male Officer

[In direct response to previous quote] I had that happen. I had a fantastic Sergeant, and when she came back from maternity leave, I only had 4 months to evaluate her. I had to mark her lower compared to everyone else because I only had that time to evaluate her.

—Male Officer

I think that is a hard question, but some of that could be on a case-by-case basis. I have 4 kids. I had my first two when it was 6 weeks' maternity leave and [my] last two with the new policy. Six weeks felt like a long time.... When I was progressing in rank and going to the longer maternity leave, I completely disconnected except for when I was studying for the test. I was set up to make rank, but I did not report, so I didn't get promoted that year. I don't know if people have experienced something similar. When I had my second child, I worked during my maternity leave. From that experience, I would have changed it a little differently. I won't get that time back. Am I completely upset I did that? I was still able to work, and my baby still got what she needed. Something I think—I think we put much strain on ourselves thinking that the mission cannot get completed without us.

—Enlisted Woman

When it comes to promotions and promotion boards and having [specialty] leadership, you have to rack and stack people for promotion. Just yesterday, we had two people that were very similar, and because one was pregnant, we couldn't consider the time that they had been out due to the pregnancy. I think that could affect who gets ranked as higher or lower, so it can definitely impact the way leadership recommends promotions.

—Female Officer

I don't think it affects it negatively too much, but I know the time away on leave or when having the baby, they can miss a lot of time when qualifications can be put in, or they can strengthen their evaluation. So, they could lose those opportunities. There are extra things they can do, but as far as leadership getting eyes on them and wanting to rank them higher, it might be hard.

—Enlisted Man

5. Participants in most groups noted the timing of pregnancy could affect a servicewoman's career progression, citing factors such as rank and career field

When asked if there was an advantageous or detrimental time to become pregnant during a servicewoman's career, participants in over half the groups said there was no good time to become pregnant. Almost all the participants who expressed this opinion were women. However, participants in most groups said a servicewoman's career field or rank is an important factor related to the timing of pregnancy in one's military career.

One hundred percent for us because—suppose you're in a certain aircraft; it ... puts you out of flying. It's very early on because if you eject, it will kill you, let alone your child. When you're in a career field where the numbers of flight-hours have effects on your career. ... There is a time to be pregnant, but it will still delay things. If you accidentally get pregnant, you're toast.

—Male Officer

I think it comes down to rank. I had my first child when I was a Lance Corporal. When I was a Staff Sergeant with my third one, no one said anything to me.

—Enlisted Woman

As a senior NCO, I would say it's absolutely detrimental [to become pregnant at this rank]. At least that's the way it feels.

—Enlisted Woman

The first tour is probably the worst time, though, if there was a worst time because that's when you are trying to establish yourself and get all the qualification you can in and you're trying to progress. I had a good experience when I was pregnant. I was [office] staff in [international country], and I had a hard time getting pregnant, and we were able to make it happen there, and it was a great time because I wasn't flying all that much then. So, it was a great time, and it didn't have much of an impact on my career progression, but we were lucky.

—Female Officer

As an [MOS], we have females in the [combat roles]. If that woman gets pregnant, she is pretty much not doing [combat] things as long as she has that baby in there. She is not patrolling, and is nondeployable, and now we are down a [Service member] and don't have anyone to fill that gap. If you have someone who is above the rank of Sergeant, now you lose a leader. But you still lose that one [Service member] and that one skill set.

—Enlisted Man

It's job-dependent too. If you are a [training instructor] and you get pregnant, you can't do [training instructor] things. You are going to do something outside of the scope of what you came there for, and it's a disadvantage because you are being ranked against your peers—those who are doing [training instructor] duties while you are doing something to pass your time by. And your time stops. You are at a pause, so you've done a year as a [training instructor], and you need to complete 2 years. Time pauses. You could be on the job for more than 3 to 4 years because you were with child.

—Enlisted Woman

Compared to other communities, it even depends on the timeline, and that starts at Lieutenant Colonel. There are probably other things like weapons schools or PME. I don't know how you make up all that work. It's a lot of stuff. If you don't get PME done, you're not promotional or at least very unlikely to be promoted.

—Male Officer

6. Over half the groups reported pregnant servicewomen were removed from their current role or key opportunities as a result of their pregnancy

Participants in over half the groups provide examples of how pregnant servicewomen were removed from their current job role or were prevented from other opportunities due to their pregnancy. Women were more likely than men to provide this response, and female officers raised this concern more frequently than female enlisted personnel.

I was up for a special board to go to school, and I was excited when I got in; it's a big deal because not everyone gets selected. The next day after I got selected, they sent me an email and said that I was an alternate and not a primary and that the list was wrong and that "we didn't realize you were pregnant," so they cut me because I was pregnant. I would have had to do a year of school and would have had plenty of time to recover before I went to a leadership role, but I was cut because I was pregnant.

—Female Officer

When I was a Private, we had a team leader, and she was a very competent, very good leader. When she became pregnant and the chain of command was aware, they moved her out of her leadership position and put her at staff. Not because she couldn't lead or be able to do simple tasks but supervising the [unit], I'm guessing, they were scared of something happening to her. They wanted to protect her. It could have hindered her from getting that experience time while she was able and capable before she took time away from the unit.

—Enlisted Man

For the military police side, talking about timing, as soon as they're pregnant, we have to take them off the roster and take their firearm. And, because we are short staffed, I hear the other [Service members] talking, and I have to deal with that, and they lose opportunities to go to school and to go to MOS schools. I know a woman who just got pregnant, and she was a superstar [at physical fitness], and now she's just a pregnant [Service member]. It's hard for junior women, and I just see them getting out because they don't want to deal with it.

—Female Officer

When I was pregnant, ... I was supposed to go to this unit, and I got surprised and told that I was going to [a different type of unit], which was a step backwards [for my career]. Afterwards, my commander told me that they really thought that job was going to be a great job for my new timeline. I think it came from the goodness of his heart, but it still felt like a jab. I felt like I was looked at differently for being a new mom.

—Female Officer

We had one of our XO's [executive officers] that become pregnant, and I'm not sure how common it is, but there was no foresight that she would be out soon for maternity leave. It seemed like instead of preplanning or having a changeover occur, it was more she was immediately pulled out into an easier area for her. She was put in a staff section with extra staff. There was no changeovers occurring in the beginning when she was not in a different physical state, and she could do her normal job.

—Enlisted Man

I've seen it multiple times in the three flying units I've been in. They pull you out of the cockpit earlier because they don't want to deal with the risk. They'll just pull you from school.

—Female Officer

My friend got pregnant recently, and they immediately tried to pull her from training. She got a waiver for continued flying, but she was told she was harming her child, even though nothing happened.

—Female Officer

7. Participants in half the groups felt servicewomen are forced to choose between their family and their career

When asked how pregnancy affects servicewomen's career progression, participants in half the groups said servicewomen are forced to choose between their family and their military career. Participants also discussed how perceiving this as a "choice" could cause some servicewomen to leave the military.

My wife is a former [Service member], and that was the reason why she got out. She did not feel she could do the job, be a [Service member], and take care of a family. She thought that would stunt her career.

—Male Officer

When you think about it, ... having to choose between career and building a family if that's important to you ...; if I'm not making progress in my career anyways, and my unit is shaming me for being pregnant because it looks like I'm evading certain mission requirements, you may want to choose building my family is more important because I can't progress. It could be a decision point for someone.

—Enlisted Woman

Not only are they behind the power curve of their job because they're out for years, but they have the problem of getting back physically, losing baby weight, and getting back to physical shape. Women who just had babies, they have to choose what's best for the family or what's best for their career, and, in my mind, this isn't a choice any of us [servicemen] have to make.

—Enlisted Man

So in my career field, once women have a child, some of them no longer wanted to be a [MOS]. Depending on where they are in their career, they might not be able to cross-train, which means they would have to be pushed out.

—Female Officer

From what I've seen, most of the time when someone becomes pregnant, it doesn't affect their career. They usually make the decision to get out following delivery. That's the few cases I've seen.

—Enlisted Man

For my sister, she's in the [Service], and when she had to go out to [do a deployment] and be separated from her daughter, that's what made her get out.

—Female Officer

8. Some of the groups discussed how their Service's fitness and body composition standards affect the career progression of pregnant and postpartum servicewomen

Participants in some groups discussed how their Service's fitness and body composition standards affected servicewomen's career progression during pregnancy and the postpartum period. Participants mentioned how the use of fitness and body composition scores for admission into career schools and for promotion could cause pregnant servicewomen to be left out or unable to qualify. Women were more likely than men to provide this response.

It's easier as an officer because we have a longer time in our MOS resident programs, where like, I have an enlisted [Service member] who is pregnant that could go to [training], but she needs a [physical fitness test] to pass, and I'm fighting it because, does she really need to run the [physical fitness test] to pass? Why? I am trying to build a Sergeant that is making [Service members], and she will pass the [physical fitness test] at some point. Why does she need to do this now?

—Female Officer

There are a whole lot of different wickets that having a child could be a detriment to, or where it wouldn't be an advantage. For example, the way we do performance reviews and physical fitness, if you take someone who was a rock star prior to pregnancy, their performance was really good, and they had a good [physical fitness test]. All of those scores stay the same when they can't do it [physical fitness tests because of pregnancy]. If they continue to perform at that rate, then they continue to look like they perform well, but on the flip side if you had lower scores [before the pregnancy], your scores are being carried forward, and you don't have the opportunity to increase those marks during pregnancy. And, like it or not, those things matter in the [Service], and so if you have a bad [physical fitness test] score, you're stuck with it for 2 to 3 years, and you're not going to get promoted. Once you have a child, you have 3 months when you're not going to be at work, so that is 3 months you are not going to be observed, but you are going to get promoted on. So, if you were knocking it out of the park before, your scores aren't going to change much, but if you weren't knocking it out of the park before, you don't have the chance to change. ... Getting pregnant doesn't allow you to improve in the [Service] if you weren't in a good situation before.

—Enlisted Man

A lot of time, commands don't want to allow you to go to school. If you take a [physical fitness] test within a certain timeframe, you miss out on the opportunity. Let's say prior to recent body fat composition changes, if you were flagged for body composition and then get pregnant, you were flagged for the duration of that pregnancy. That could cause issues because you can't overcome that "deficiency"; you are missing out on opportunities.

—Enlisted Woman

I'm about to hit that 1-year mark, and there is an underlying worry about whether I am going to make it. And with the new body composition assessment, ... I have seen it where women's own birth months and the year postpartum period are causing their [physical fitness] test and body composition assessment to line up back-to-back. So, if you fail one and then fail the other, it definitely impacts your career.

—Female Officer

9. Participants in some groups cited the lack of available child care as a challenge for servicewomen's career progression

When asked how pregnancy affects servicewomen's career progression or what challenges pregnant servicewomen face, participants in some groups cited lack of available and reliable child care as an obstacle affecting servicewomen's ability to advance in their careers.

Child care after they come back to work. I work with four women with children, and getting their child into a CDC is tough. Usually when they get postpartum orders, it's a little harder for them to do child care, especially if they're dual-military families.

—Enlisted Man

Child care. I'm currently pregnant. Just talking to other women here, I know child care—it's not just [installation] but across the [Service]—you're on the waitlist and won't be in until a year or 8 months after birth. If you don't have family in the area, how do you balance work or continue to prepare to be a soon-to-be mom?

—Enlisted Woman

An issue with retention is child care. You get 3 months of maternity leave, and then you have to be back and have child care figured out. I put my kid on waitlist for the CDC when I found out I was pregnant, and it took 14 months. But people PCS'ing, they go somewhere new, and they expect to have child care, but the waitlists are insane. I have a friend, and their son was on the list for 2 years, but getting financial assistance for getting private child care is hard. The waitlist around here for decent child care is 8 to 10 months. I had to solve that by moving my in-laws into my house, so I have [the] financial burden of taking care of them, so now me and my husband who are dual-military are facing that challenge. Child care is a big retention factor.

—Female Officer

My last unit was in [international country], and the [enlisted leader] was dual-military. Her husband was an E7 and a [leader] in a different unit. They immediately got on the child care waitlist, but it was a mile long; they had 30 to 50 people in front of them. They would alternate days where the kids would sit inside the office at the [unit] where they worked because they couldn't get child care. The chain of command gave them some telework, but she was adamant about being there and being in the fight. She was motivated; even though she had two kids on deck, she was getting it done. So I would say family care as far as dual-military [is a challenge].

—Enlisted Woman

I've seen a few female [Service members] where their heart is set on being a mother and starting a family, and being a Service member affects that because you still have a mission. Child care is also an issue. The CDC doesn't have enough hours, and then you have to work with leadership to take time off to take care of your kid. So, I've seen some female [Service members] get out not because they hated the Service but because they wanted a good family relationship, not because they hated the military.

—Enlisted Man

10. Participants in some groups mentioned family care plans when discussing how pregnancy, parenthood, and child care affect servicewomen's career progression

Participants in some groups mentioned family care plans when discussing how pregnancy, parenthood, and child care affect servicewomen's career progression. Participants in these groups described how leaders were requesting family care plans in inappropriate contexts or using them as a way to demonstrate a lack of readiness. Some participants described how Service members, primarily women, were questioned about their family care plans ahead of training or other career-enhancing opportunities. Some discussions also mentioned how the lack of available and reliable child care exacerbates issues related to family care plans. Women were more likely than men to provide this response.

My kids are always sick, and so I have to stay home with them, especially now that the CDCs have changed the rules after COVID. I don't know if that is something the [Service] can necessarily work on, but it is a challenge. And when I have had issues before, I have been told that that is what the family care plan is for, and I'm like, that is not what that is for. That is for when my husband and I are both TDY or when we are both deployed. They want us to have other options, but we move and don't always have people we know or can trust.

—Female Officer

We went through this with a couple [Service members] recently within my tour where I'm at. It was perhaps the availability of child care. We had a [Service member] who—she has now transferred. She is dual-military and couldn't find child care. The CDC wasn't available, and she had trouble finding other child care. She had to come in late, miss the [unit] meetings when she was in an [leadership] position. The [unit] shop was, "Now, where is your family care plan?" holding that over people's heads. I see that more often than not. The FCP is supposed to be a tool if they come in need of it instead of utilizing it as a weapon; that's something that should not happen. There is a stigma that needs to change. What are you going to do with that family care plan? You are making their life harder; all you are doing is causing them undue stress. That's the biggest thing to touch on.

—Enlisted Woman

I've seen it; it takes one crappy leader to change the future of a [Service member's] career. A family care plan isn't solid enough. It's, "Why aren't you here?" Writing someone up for being late if they have child care issues, "I don't care; get to work." There's one crappy person who is coming down on them for trying to do a basic thing like taking care of their own child. I've seen it happen more often than not. It's the mark of poor leadership as well. ...

—Enlisted Woman

[This one male leader], it's "Hey, where do you want to go for next job in brigade? Deployment? Do you have an FCP issue?" I'm like, "No, I want to go this battalion. This is the mission, and I want to do. It's not an issue." Their brain is going to jump immediately to me not being ready in some way. It's not career goal planning, it is, "You are unable to take care of your stuff." There's a bias there whether he recognizes it or not. One example within my career, a recent one where I know there is a bias. Do they make any decisions with that unconscious bias where that ends up affecting you? I want to apply to the next job; I want to interview with them. It's, do I be upfront with them that I am planning to have a child, or do I hide it from them? It's a conversation I've had with females more senior than me. It doesn't do much to hide it, but if they won't hire you knowing you might have a child sometime, then you don't want to work for that person anyway.

—Female Officer

C. Policies Designed to Support Pregnant Servicewomen

DACOWITS was interested in learning whether Service members were aware of any DoD or Service-level policies, regulations, or practices that support pregnant servicewomen's career progression. To this end, the Committee asked focus group participants to identify any policies and practices designed to support pregnant servicewomen's career progression. The Committee also asked participants for their recommendations on how the Military Services could better support pregnant servicewomen.

Participants in most groups could identify a policy, regulation, or practice that supported pregnant servicewomen; however, participants in over half the groups also reported some confusion over policy details or requirements. Participants in some groups also said the existing policies did not do enough to support pregnant servicewomen because they did not address the impact parental and convalescent leave has on promotions and performance evaluations, and the policies do not account for difficult birth experiences. Relatedly, some participants recommended policy changes that would better address the impact of pregnancy on servicewomen's career progression. Other recommendations included

increasing funding for and access to breastfeeding and lactation rooms and improving access to reproductive healthcare.

1. Participants were generally unaware of DoD's 2020 discrimination policy update to include pregnancy as a form of prohibited discrimination, although many participants thought pregnancy was already a prohibited form of discrimination

DoD updated its discrimination policy in 2020 to explicitly include pregnancy as a form of prohibited discrimination. Previously, the Department only prohibited unlawful employment discrimination based on pregnancy for its civilian employees (DACOWITS, 2020). DoD Instruction 1350.02 of the DoD Military Equal Opportunity (MEO) program outlines the following policy:

DoD, through the DoD MEO program, will ensure that Service members are treated with dignity and respect and are afforded equal opportunity in an environment free from prohibited discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, religion, sex (including pregnancy),⁷ gender identity, or sexual orientation (DoD, 2020, p. 4).

DoD's definition of prohibited discrimination follows:

Discrimination, including disparate treatment, of an individual or group on the basis of race, color, national origin, religion, sex (including pregnancy),⁸ gender identity, or sexual orientation that is not otherwise authorized by law or regulation and detracts from military readiness (DoD, 2020, p. 38).

When focus group participants were asked to raise their hands if they were aware of this policy change, only 11 percent of participants indicated their awareness. Women were slightly more likely to know about this policy change (13 percent) than men (8 percent). Male participants in several groups reported they had not been aware of this policy change because they assumed discrimination on the basis of pregnancy had always been prohibited.

I think everyone generally assumed that was already a thing (other focus group participants nod in agreement or provided verbal agreement).

—Enlisted Man

I thought it was always part of the system. (Moderator: How many thought that?) (All participants in the group raise their hands.)

—Male Officer

For those things, no one really knows until it applies to them.

—Enlisted Man

I'm a lawyer, and I didn't know that.

—Female Officer

⁷ Underline added for emphasis

⁸ Underline added for emphasis

2. Participants in most groups were aware of at least one policy or practice that supports servicewomen's career progression

Participants were asked if they were aware of any regulations, policies, or practices that would support a servicewoman's career if she became pregnant. Participants in most groups mentioned at least one policy, regulation, or practice. The most discussed policies follow:

- ▶ CIP
- ▶ Postpartum fitness tests
- ▶ Parental leave policies
- ▶ Flight waivers for pregnancy

The one policy I would say is kind of positive is CIP, but that has been pushed towards me as something to use for pregnancy. But that program doesn't fit all the needs for everyone. It's not a one-stop shop for families.

—Female Officer

I think they're doing better. I've never been pregnant, but you used to not be able to go to the academy. I think they're doing better with certain policies like expanding the time you have until you have to take the fitness test, but I don't know how helpful that's been.

—Enlisted Woman

There are a lot of things in place as far as exemptions from physical fitness and standards.

—Male Officer

Again, that flight waiver. Even just getting the waiver as a pregnant [Service member]. I haven't experienced it personally, but a peer of mine begged and pleaded for that waiver, and she did not have health issues or anything, but they said, "Nah, that's not gonna happen."

—Female Officer

I don't know if new policies support career progression, but they support the progression of your family unit. It allows adequate time for the Service member to be at home with their newborn and develop that relationship before having to go back to work and continue to compete in their job.

—Male Officer

This is not a specific policy, but the evaluation instruction. When we're ranking [Service members] and capturing a reporting period on evaluation, we're not allowed, and I wouldn't want to, but we're not supposed to hold maternity absences against a [Service member]. [As another focus group participant] was saying earlier how you're not able to get after qualifications, and you hit pause on your career while you're away for pregnancy and postpartum, but you're not going to jump up the rankings like you expected. But we can't use that to hold you down; we still have to consider your progression. The policy makes it so we can't discriminate against them. Policies like that might protect them.

—Enlisted Man

3. Participants in over half the groups expressed confusion over policies and regulations related to servicewomen who are pregnant

Although participants in most groups discussed at least one policy, regulation, or practice that supported pregnant servicewomen, participants in over half the groups also expressed confusion over the details of these policies and practices. This confusion primarily focused on pregnant servicewomen's ability to attend schools and trainings and whether pregnant servicewomen were eligible for temporary duty assignments. Some participants also expressed confusion over promotion board regulations and postpartum fitness test standards.

4. Participants in some groups felt existing policies needed to be more comprehensive in their support for pregnant servicewomen's career progression

Participants in some groups felt existing policies needed to be more comprehensive because they did not address the ways in which parental and convalescent leave affect servicewomen's ability to be promoted, and they also do not address the needs of servicewomen who have difficult pregnancies or birth experiences. Enlisted personnel were more likely than officers to provide this response.

You can't support ...; let me give you an example. If I am going up against her (gestures to another focus group participant) in a ranking board based off of my evaluation, it's based off of the last year or if I was pregnant or coming off baby leave. What did I do in those 6 months? Their eval[uation]—I will speak to being higher ranked than I, and it's not my fault—what can I do? I'm not the best and most qualified. I remain the same. I didn't grow—what can you do? It's not a matter of answering these questions; it's changing the ranking and evaluation system rather than the support.

—Enlisted Woman

The thing with pregnancy is you don't really know—you do not know about the health things that could happen within that timeframe. I've had [Service members] who can't keep down food on their own; therefore, they can't come to work. They didn't choose that. They chose to be pregnant, but they didn't choose that. And there isn't anything about that in the performance report, but I don't know. What are the effects of that? Then knowing that things could happen afterwards like preeclampsia. You don't ask for those things. I think those are concerns, and I don't have an answer for that. But as a person who wants to progress in their career..., I'm stuck in a place that I can't do anything about my health.

—Enlisted Woman

D. Recommendations to Better Support Servicewomen Who Become Pregnant

DACOWITS asked focus group participants how their Service could better support servicewomen who become pregnant. Participants shared various recommendations related to servicewomen's career progression, lactation support, and reproductive healthcare.

1. Participants in some groups recommended policy changes to address the impact of pregnancy on performance evaluations and promotions

Participants felt more needed to be done to address the impact of pregnancy on a servicewoman's evaluations and promotions. These recommendations focused on ensuring equitable promotion and performance evaluations for Service members who took parental or convalescent leave and reevaluating pregnancy-related policies for schools and trainings. Men were more likely than women to provide this response, and almost all the participants who made this recommendation were enlisted.

There should be some leeway on performance evaluations because they [pregnant servicewomen] are out for an extended amount of time, and you are telling someone to put their career over their child if you're pushing them to work when they're at home.

—Enlisted Man

My wife and I talked about this. Even as young [MOS] personnel, they asked both of us to make sure our officer progress report is filled out. They [pregnant servicewomen] miss out on 120 days where they're technically responsible for work. I would like to see a policy where you're on caregiver's leave, and its unrated time, so you're only active for those 8 months, and that reflects that.

—Male Officer

Especially since COVID, we went how many years without having a [physical fitness] test, and the [Service] didn't fall apart. They need to individualize policies for the school[s], have a flowchart, rather than a blanket policy for all schools. ... Those directly tied to promotion, some are career enhancing. ... Let's say I'm going to take a class for 30 days in front of a computer, but you can't go because you don't have a [physical fitness] test within 30 days? It's not a physical school, so why do we have this policy?

—Enlisted Woman

When talking about evaluations and pausing careers. Yes, we have policies in place that prevent discrimination, but if we look at a year's snapshot and have a new policy where caregiver leave takes you out for 4 months out of the year, that is a large piece of the year where I can't evaluate someone. So just by reduction, I can't move that person above someone that has been there the whole year. So, I've thought about this.... I don't have kids, not married to a military spouse, but if there was some sort of pause where we could pause their service and evaluation, that could be helpful.

—Enlisted Man

2. Participants in some groups recommended increased funding and better policies for breastfeeding and lactation rooms

Participants also raised the issue of breastfeeding and lactation rooms as an area where additional support is needed for postpartum servicewomen. These recommendations focused on earmarking funds to ensure lactation rooms were created in existing spaces or creating better policies to ensure breastfeeding servicewomen had access to clean and private areas while they were in the field or on temporary assignment.

I would say postpartum as well for breastfeeding and things like that, having the time to pump. There's a transition where child care is difficult to find, and it's super expensive when you have a newborn and you have to get back to work. I would say the accessibility to child care and having a private space for breastfeeding and pumping. The [Service] has to provide a private space dedicated for breastfeeding, but that's an entire room, and it's difficult when we're always short on rooms and office space anyways.

—Male Officer

One more thing I'd like to touch on is postpartum and the lack of spaces for breastfeeding. I don't know how many times I've had to lean over a sink, or be in a locker room, and there just isn't enough space, and there are so many women that have to dump out milk at the end of the day during field day.

—Female Officer

I don't know the pain of a female [Service member] who has to pump. Do you do it in the vehicle or porta-john? That doesn't register in my mind—that when you pump, you are making food for a child. There are times that females have missed out on deployments because there are not facilities to support them.

—Enlisted Man

I think ensuring the funding for lactation pods. There has been a lot of confusion on the regulation, and we have not seen any movement on that. If it's something that is mandated, we should ensure that there are funds set aside, and there are no competing interests.

—Female Officer

3. Participants in some groups recommended additional reproductive healthcare benefits and better OBGYN care for servicewomen

Participants also recommended additional reproductive healthcare benefits as a way to better support servicewomen who become pregnant. These recommendations included better access to OBGYN care on smaller and more remote installations and access to assisted reproductive services, such as egg freezing and IVF. Women were more likely than men to make this type of recommendation.

I would like to 2nd, 3rd, and 17th that women's health is not specialty care! Anything involving women's health is astronomically difficult [to schedule appointments and be seen for care], and it's not different. It's just care.

—Enlisted Woman

I think they need to prioritize prenatal care. At my last base, it was 1.5 hours away, and I didn't have those options (to be seen by an off-base provider).

—Enlisted Woman

The majority of cases I've seen have been unplanned pregnancies at a lower rank. There needs to be a clear line of communication that service members have available options for prevention if necessary, anything in that area.

—Enlisted Man

A program that makes it easier for females who want family someday but haven't been proposed to or haven't tried to have children for other reasons, to help them store their eggs. Then I don't have to stress about my age or marital status. Then I can store my eggs, and when the time is right, they're available. Maybe it's closer to when I'm 40, but that's not feasible now.

—Female Officer

I would say having the ability to save sperm too, but also research effects of radar on male sperm health.

—Female Officer

They need to drop [the] requirement for trying [to have a baby for] more than a year. It shouldn't matter. And we'll lie our asses off and tell the doctors we've tried for a year to start a family. It would be helpful if there was a one-stop shop that explains, "This is the way to navigate TRICARE." Right now, information is hard to piece together; it's not widely discussed. Like the Aviatrix Project, or the Military Family Building Coalition [which is available to aviators]. But for all communities, it's helpful for aviators to give you that handholding experience, but why am I different? Why isn't it made available to us [nonaviators], but if they could just put it in one place, get rid of [the] timing requirement, and give us access to care sooner, that would get rid of a lot of stress.

—Female Officer

4. Participants in some groups said there were already enough policies in place to support pregnant servicewomen, or they felt that more policies would not effect meaningful change

When asked how their Service could better support pregnant servicewomen, participants in some groups said there were enough policies in place to support pregnant servicewomen. Relatedly, participants also mentioned how more policies would not effect meaningful change. Men were more likely than women to provide this response.

I don't know if there is anything they can do better. There is a policy that if you become pregnant, you can essentially pause your time in the DoD.

—Enlisted Man

As officers, we have a program called career intermission, where it freezes your career, and you leave, unpaid of course, but it can freeze your career for 2 years. You can come back and pick up where you left off. That is an option for all ranks or females if they want to start a family. The pay issue would be difficult. It's hard to justify it to pay someone for a year or two without getting anything out of it.

—Male Officer

I think everything is a supporting factor to an extent, but it's all based off the view that you have and what you do with it. [Another participant] had said before that [physical fitness test] scores can be put on pause, and that can be a good thing or bad thing depending on if they were good or bad scores. So, who do you blame that on? The [Service] or the [Service member]? Is that a good or bad thing?

—Enlisted Man

Yeah, the culture and the really ingrained cultural resistance to allow the new changes to take place and continue without allowing discrimination, inadvertently or on purpose. I don't want to say that's a lost cause, but I don't have a lot of faith in a lot of the senior leaders to do a lot more than what's already published on paper.

—Female Officer

E. Expanded Military Parental Leave Program (MPLP)

In January 2023, DoD significantly expanded the MPLP to provide 12 weeks of paid parental leave for birth and nonbirth parents alike. The birth parent is also eligible for an additional 6 weeks of paid convalescent leave. Previously, nonbirthing parents (known as “secondary caregivers”) had 14 to 21 days of leave. To understand how this policy change has affected the lives of Service members, the Committee asked focus groups participants how they felt about this change and their Service’s implementation of the policy. Participants in the majority of groups discussed both positive and negative aspects of the policy change. While women and men equally expressed positive and negative opinions on the policy change, specific positive and negative factors varied by gender. Table 4.1 provides an overview of positive and negative themes participants raised.

Table 4.1. Overview of Positive and Negative Themes Focus Group Participants’ Raised During Discussion on Expansion of Parental Leave Policies in 2023

Positive	Negative
<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Expanded leave accounts for difficult birth experiences■ The expansion is good for families■ Men expressed gratitude at being given the opportunity to bond with their children■ The expansion facilitates more equality in caregiving	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ The length of leave could hinder career progression■ Longer parental leaves may negatively affect unit readiness and staffing■ Men may receive pushback from unit leaders for taking their full leave

Source: Focus group transcripts

1. Positive themes participants raised about the expanded parental leave policies

Male participants were more likely to say the parental leave policy was good for families, and this opinion was almost exclusively expressed by male enlisted Service members. Conversely, female participants were more likely to discuss how the parental leave policy facilitated a more equitable distribution of child care responsibilities. Female participants were also more likely to say that allowing fathers to take parental leave would result in a more equitable appraisal of performance evaluations and promotion packages now that male Service members may have equivalent gaps in their evaluability period.

In my experience, there was always a conversation about why mothers got time to bond with their children and why fathers didn't. I've been on a bunch of deployments. I came home on one deployment, and my daughter was 2 years old and mad that I had left her and didn't talk to me, ... so I think it's a good decision ...

—Enlisted Man

I think it's great for starting a family and when you're a junior [Service member], and it's your first child. If you didn't have time to take leave, I think it could start a rocky relationship between the couple. I also think it [not being able to take leave] could cause issues between the spouse and the [Service] because the spouse could feel like their [Service member] can never be home to help out. So, I think it's a good change. I've seen so many [Service members] struggle to balance the military lifestyle with the family lifestyle, and I think this will help them in their career, and [it] shows families we actually do care about them. I think it will encourage people to stay in the military rather than feeling like they have to choose their family and get out.

—Enlisted Man

I was lucky enough to have my spouse at home, and I gave birth when it was at 6 weeks, and I couldn't imagine that—mothers having to do it alone. I think it's incredible they don't have to choose anymore between primary and secondary and have that debate in the unit anymore, and I think that eliminates a lot of peers saying, "I don't get this. You get this because you're pregnant, and that's not fair." Whatever you choose to do with that is up to you, but it's fair.

—Enlisted Woman

For the extension [of parental leave], it's good because you can plan it out when the pregnancy happens. My wife had three C-sections, and the recovery is way longer than natural, so it's good they are getting extended days because she couldn't do it alone; it was hard on her.

—Enlisted Man

I think what will help relieve that stigma is the new parental leave policy. Now I see men getting flagged for it too. Welcome to the club.

—Enlisted Woman

It goes back to what I was saying; the new policy allows time for women to be able to stay home with their newborn. It allows for the spouse to take adequate time to stay home and create that bond with their child and support their spouse since there is a lot of other complications that could arise from coming out of a pregnancy, like infections or if they have to stay in the hospital for an extended period of time. Being given more time is good.

—Male Officer

Someone in my unit, his wife had a baby, and he's very grateful he had extended time. It was the second time, and he's grateful he had more time to be at home and take care of things compared to things with his first pregnancy.

—Enlisted Man

I really like it. I think the playing field is more even when it comes to promotion evaluation because it's not just the pregnant women having to fill the performance report with bullets. It's going to be the males as well, and I think it's good for fathers in general.

—Enlisted Woman

I think it's great that they went away with the secondary caregiver term all together. To [focus group participant's] point earlier, the nongestational parent is involved just as much in the child's care, and I think that's a huge step in the right direction. I think with child care—if you just can't take leave, the nonbirth parent could break that up, and if I give birth and don't have child care, dad could step in and take care of the baby. I think it provides better availability of care.

—Enlisted Woman

My point is, I agree this is a hard manning issue, and I appreciate that, but females aren't the ones causing that. I was causing the problem before by carrying a human being, but now... you have to consider everyone now. Now there are two people caring for a child, and that's important for moving forward.

—Female Officer

2. Negative themes participants raised about the expanded parental leave policies

Female participants were slightly more likely than male participants to discuss how the new parental leave policy would hinder career progression for servicemen and servicewomen alike. However, male participants were more likely to discuss how the length of parental leave would negatively affect unit staffing and personnel assignments.

Men are receiving more pressure than women. Women are able to take leave with less issue, take the full block of leave. I've seen ... I follow [Service] Reddit. I see the unfiltered commenting on there. There are pushes towards men to take a week of block leave here or there instead of being able to let them take the block where they really need to have another supportive parent there. I had a C-section. I am so glad I had my husband for the 21 days I had him. It would have been lovely to have him for 3 months. Units are pushing back on males. Someone was like, "You need to come back; you can [take] your week of leave another time; you need to come back earlier." It's the culture. There needs to be stronger enforcements that you can take the block. But what works for your unit, you can take it, but you have to make sure you are playing within your unit.

—Female Officer

My thoughts on the policy change ... when my last unit officer, who was a [unit leadership position], he was going through something like that. He had his child, and the policy just went into effect. It was a very rough time because there were a lot of things going on. They were kind of worried because it was 90 days, worried about how we were going to be able to function without him being there. We made it, but there was a stigma of "I'm going to be gone for 3 months." We have this additional workload. It's good you can be with your wife and child for 90 days. But there's definitely a stigma for that and for being gone that long if it's during [high operational tempo] cycle.

—Enlisted Man

Female Officer number 1: This is from the top three [leaders] in the command saying, "You will not progress if you take all your benefits."

Female Officer number 2: Correct. The message is, "We will meet the policy, but you will have consequences on the back end."

—Female Officers

Ask that question in a few years when it's been implemented. It's great for the family member that gave birth, but it's a long time. Right now, it's tricky the way retention and manning is. I just lost three of my [Service members] for 4 months. So, that's 30 percent of my workforce. It's good for them, but how do I fill those gaps? Usually, it's me filling those gaps.

—Enlisted Man

I agree with managing your manpower. It puts leadership in a hard spot. When we went from 6 weeks for moms as primary caregiver leave, then 18, and now scaled it back again. And it comes down to performance reviews, but now it's at 12. So interesting how you balance that for the nonbirth parent too.

—Female Officer

Yeah, my husband is senior Captain, and if he takes all 3 months ... he feels like he can't do it because he is the most qualified in his unit, so it's like, if you do it, you won't progress, or you feel like you can't.

—Female Officer

It's easier now since we aren't a constant rotation of deployments like in GWOT [Global War on Terror]. It's easier to have this kind of policy with a garrison [Service]. I don't know what it would look like if we had another conflict. It might be harder to have consistency with this policy.

—Enlisted Man

If I have an entire [group] of [Service members] that want to take parental caregiver leave. ... I can't support that. I'm having that problem now. We want to support it, but I can only give them 2 or 4 weeks because they have a needed skill. So, it's a great program on paper and toward the right answer, but in practicality, it might not work out well in the long run.

—Female Officer

F. Prevalence of Gender Discrimination

DACOWITS asked focus group participants about gender discrimination in their Service, including its prevalence, contextual factors, the impact on servicewomen's career progression, and participants' comfort in reporting issues of gender discrimination and confidence that unit or command leaders would address such complaints.

Prior to the discussion, the moderators defined gender discrimination as “acting in a way that is biased toward a particular gender” to ensure participants shared a common understanding of this concept. The moderators also emphasized both women and men can experience gender discrimination. The moderators noted such discrimination can include overt behaviors, such as excluding someone from a leadership position or important meeting because of their gender, or covert behaviors, such as acting on stereotypes by asking only women to plan social activities or men to do a task requiring physical labor.

Participants in the majority of groups considered gender discrimination to be a problem in their Service and provided examples of specific behaviors and cultural perceptions they considered to be discriminatory. Participants also emphasized the important role leaders play in perpetuating or preventing gender discrimination and noted other factors, such as career field and unit culture, that

contribute to gender discrimination in their Service. Participants also made recommendations related to training, education, and policies that could prevent future gender discrimination.

1. Participants in the majority of groups considered gender discrimination to be a problem in their Service

Participants in the majority of groups considered gender discrimination to be a problem in their Service, with women being more likely to endorse this opinion than men. Servicewomen were also more likely to provide personal examples of gender discrimination to support this claim.

When it comes to deploying—with me being supply, they come to supply for support because that's what we're for. An instance of this is when there were two people up, one male and a female. They chose the male and specifically said they do not want the female. It did not matter if he could do the job or not.

—Enlisted Woman

Where I've seen it is in joint [Service] deployment. I sent my Captain to them, and they said to send someone else. So, I went, and they said, "Oh, finally. You're a guy." So, I went back and sent her. You're not going to disrespect my Captain.

—Male Officer

I agree. There is me and my battle buddy; we're both in the same building but different company; we both do same job. I feel like ... he's a male; he does whatever he wants, and it's fine. I'm staying after 6 p.m., working early, putting in hours, and I never get recognized. But he does the slightest amount of work, and it's, "Oh my god, you did it!" That's what I've observed.

—Enlisted Woman

So from a historical context, yes. It's an elephant in the room that we have not addressed, and most of the time it was ... with all-male units. In terms of how it's reviewed, when you're young and impressionable in boot camp, [instructors] referred to women in all types of ways. If I take myself over these past 20 years and reflect on how I view females, it's a 180-degree turn. I grew from then to now. I didn't interact with them for the first 10 years of my career until I was at the embassy. Most of the time, I think in most units, it has not been addressed. It cannot be undone overnight.

—Male Officer

I agree [with that] definition. In my current unit, I have not experienced any gender discrimination overtly. But there's been times in my previous unit where any FRG [Family Readiness Group], any ball, any social event, there is never a male OIC assigned to it. They say, "She can do it" because "the planning will be squared away." There's been times where, the comments were made; it was always emphasized that we have a female commander. ... The battalion commander thought that he was doing the right thing, but now you are minimizing my commander by putting female in front of it. I've seen that happen. In my current unit, I haven't had any overt experiences with gender discrimination; I know it happens, but it hasn't happened specifically to me. The conversations, people dance around them, or they know how to cover them up; they are more political with what they say. In other units ... their tact was different than in my unit.

—Female Officer

I've seen not overt, but not covert is the word; it's not that. It's the unconscious bias, the comments from senior leaders in our organization, not our battalion but higher. We have more females in our unit, so that's a burden we have to deal with on the readiness stats. We are more likely to have more pregnancies. They literally say "burden." Wow. It's watching this person talk over a female 9 times out of 10 at a briefing that we did. I've watched it happen multiple times. They talk over the senior female that was there but never senior males.

—Female Officer

Gender discrimination will be something that is always in the Service, unfortunately. Whether in your face or inadvertently, you realize you are in a unit with different people from different places, and everyone has [a] different mindset. They are raised differently or stuck in their ways about something. What's right to them might not be to someone else. It could be innocence or ignorance.

—Enlisted Man

I know from my friends in [MOS] that the females have been discriminated against more than their male counterparts.

—Enlisted Man

2. When asked to describe discriminatory behavior, participants in the majority of groups shared examples of negative cultural perceptions of servicewomen

When participants were asked if they had observed any behaviors during their military service they would consider to be gender discrimination, participants in the majority of groups provided examples of negative cultural perceptions of women. The most commonly discussed perception was that servicewomen are not as valuable or as capable as their male counterparts.

I haven't seen people act on biases; it's more behind-closed-doors talk. People will complain not directly to the female [Service member] but talk about the perceived benefits she might have, such as the leave and things like that. They don't take female injuries as serious; if a female is nursing an injury and on [limited duty], they think it will be them getting out of work. There's behind-closed-doors talk but not as much action.

—Enlisted Man

I think it depends on your MOS and if you're still learning your job. When I came to my unit, I was the only female mechanic. They talked to me like I didn't know anything. I was given the easier tasks and was not challenged. The person who controlled, who got to work on the trucks, spent more time with the male I came to the unit with than with me.

—Enlisted Woman

I saw more in the [MOS] world than anywhere else so far. There was... I don't know. I saw more subtle things like holding women to a different standard than the guys, and it was universally. It was the system and not top down. It was one guy in the unit, or one or two people, and everyone knew what person was like that. And everyone would let it slide. They'd get on females for things they'd let guys get away with. Not like guys should be getting away with it anyway.

—Male Officer

Women have to work 10 times harder than men to get on the same playing field, not even accelerated but the same playing field as men. We are at a deficit when we come into the [Service]. Master degree, it doesn't matter; we are at a deficit.

—Enlisted Woman

Discriminatory, I wouldn't say it's that, but people just talking about their own biases with female inabilities in combat arms. Ultimately, they didn't object to them being in that place in the organization, but they didn't give them the opportunity to showcase their ability to do their jobs.

—Male Officer

My opinion, there are a lot of females who are in male-dominant battalions, MOSs, or brigades that have to work twice as hard to prove they are as fit to keep up with the guys. Sometimes they are pushed to the back if they don't step up. The men will just do it and take over.

—Enlisted Man

3. Participants in the majority of groups described covert behaviors when providing examples of gender discrimination

When providing examples of gender discrimination, participants in the majority of groups provided examples of covert behaviors. Covert behaviors were defined as behaviors that perpetuate, or are based on, gender stereotypes. Examples of covert behaviors provided by participants included designating some jobs as “women’s work” and only asking women to engage in these tasks, comparing women with other women, and engaging in microaggressions toward servicewomen. Women were more likely to provide examples of covert discrimination than men.

The [designated sexual assault victim collateral duty staff] will always be a female. (Other focus group participants nod and agree). I was asked to become [one], and at first, I was asked to do it, and I was like, okay, but looking back there was only women [in this role]. The majority of commanders I've worked for try to get women to be [sexual assault victim advocates for the unit] because they don't want to deal with it [sexual assault], and they identify it as a female problem.

—Female Officer

Yeah [designated sexual assault victim collateral duty staff], EOO [Equal Opportunity Officer], the party planner, those are the ones that are like, “Give it to whatever female is in the unit because they'll do a good job,” and like, I didn't join the [Service] to be an event planner.

—Female Officer

I walked into a work environment that was toxic, all females. I raised hard issues, concrete, not the gaslighting stuff, the hard stuff. I was met with resistance and was told that this was a problem because there are too many women in one place, and we need to go out and talk it through over lunch. We just need to talk it out because we're women with strong personalities. I thought that was discrimination.

—Female Officer

I've only experienced one time of overt discrimination against me, and it was a commander, and he was rapidly removed from his command. I have not experienced it since, but it is the way they [male Service members] speak about women. Or like, when it's time to plan a social gathering, they are like, "Where is that one female Staff Sergeant?" Or like, if there is an issue with a female [Service member], they are looking to the one female leader [to step in]. Or, if it's a height and weight issue, they'll come to me and be like, "Why does she look like that?" and I'm like, well, she's in standard. With the hair standards ... (the group groans in agreement).

—Female Officer

Something our command told us is that ... we are getting a female [Service member] getting back over to us and that we needed to watch how we talked to each other and to her because our job is very physical, and we use crass and crude language when we talk to each other, and it might be jarring to the female ... is how they put it.

—Enlisted Man

One thing I've seen regarding discrimination is with event planning. It's almost always a woman planning an event. It's not out of the ordinary in the planning shop. A lot of these women are much more detail-oriented, much more organized. I think the command naturally selects them because they don't want someone to ruin the ball. I think it's more of a reward because they trust that individual so much.

—Male Officer

For me, it's three behaviors. First, being talked to very gently versus any of my male counterparts. In maintenance, it's rude and crude. If you mess up, you get yelled at in front of everyone then move on. For me, they would just let me mess up [and not say anything], or they'd pull me into the room and talk to me one-on-one. If I have a new boss, I tell him to treat me like everyone else.... Second, we get called a b-word if we act like everyone else. The third is if you're a mother and you have to leave to take care of your child, you get crap for it. If the father does it, it's, "Oh, it's a good thing he's doing."

—Enlisted Woman

4. Participants in half the groups described overt behaviors when providing examples of discrimination

When providing examples of gender discrimination, participants in half the groups provided examples of overt behaviors. Overt behaviors were defined as explicit instances of gender discrimination such as excluding people from opportunities or leadership roles because of their gender. Examples of overt behaviors participants provided included the exclusion of servicewomen from important career opportunities and prejudicial comments about servicewomen. Women were more likely to provide examples of overt discrimination than men.

When there is a senior [enlisted leader] on the phone telling my senior [enlisted leader] I can't go to a course because I'm a female, that's pretty discriminatory. ... I was in the room and heard it; I was offended and hurt. They had no idea of my capability based on my gender; it's absurd. That was only 5 years ago, but it shows it is real and still here.

—Enlisted Woman

I've been told by males that women shouldn't be in the military and watch them treat female junior [Service members] differently, where they put resources into male [Service members] but not female. That's what I've seen.

—Female Officer

A lady friend of mine, her mom passed away, and she had to take time off, and when she came back, she was in a meeting and got emotional, and her commander asked her if she was done having her emotional outburst. And like, would they have said that to another [Service member] if they weren't a woman? I don't think so.

—Enlisted Man

Maybe it doesn't happen as much in [a support unit], but when I was in [a different type of unit], I was the only female in leadership, and one of the biggest issues I had is that my CO [commanding officer] liked to comment on my appearance a lot. He would never comment on a male's body, and it made me very uncomfortable. And when it came to planning events, it was like, "Oh, this is your job because you're the female," and it was like, he didn't even blink when he said it.

—Female Officer

5. Participants in the majority of groups said gender discrimination was more likely to occur in certain occupational specialties than others

Participants in the majority of groups felt gender discrimination was more likely to occur in some occupational specialties than others. Participants reported gender discrimination was more likely to occur in the combat arms occupational specialties than in support specialties, such as administration or intelligence or in the medical field.

Now females are integrated in combat arms, and it's still a big issue at large right now, but after serving with combat arms and seeing female infantry [Service members] and female engineer [Service members]—as soon as they get hurt, it's, "Oh, these females." It's always "these females." And if one [Service member] is hurt and the other is not, they compare the two: "She's elite," and "She's struggling and is on [limited duty]." They are not trying to understand that everyone's bodies are genetically made different. They think they [servicewomen] are trying to find ways out of it or trying not to do it, but they are legitimately hurt. The combat MOSs think they are a medic and know what is going on with someone's body outside of a what a [Service member] is telling them. It's still a big issue.

—Enlisted Woman

My husband is a [MOS] officer, and there are no female [combat specialties] or [same MOS] officers, and if they have a female support person in their unit, they are very popular in the wrong way (group laughs). So, in the fields that are more male-dominated, women are seen as a shiny penny.

—Female Officer

Being an engineer, the job is more physical. There are combat engineers, the [MOS] blowing things up. [MOS] is still pretty physical. In the battalion we are in, everyone is expected to be physical. ... They expect everyone has a certain physicality to them. If you're a female and you can't meet that despite wanting to go to the schools, it does look negative. ... If you don't have [certain trainings], ... you will get judged for not wanting to progress your career tactically. I've noticed being in the engineer branch, the technical and badge schools, there are technical pieces to it. A master's in civilian engineering, you can go a technical niche route in the engineering branch. Most women get judged more harshly than men for wanting to do that [more technical route] because they are shying away from the tough, hard schools. But it's just, no, that's actually what I want to do. That's me speaking from personal experience.

—Female Officer

My experience in a [MOS] unit, that was a conversation with some leaders. We had a [Service member], and she was falling back when it came to physical requirements. This leader has this vendetta to push for her further than other guys because they wanted to get her chaptered out. It's still an active thing going on. I've seen people do better in certain positions or certain times and others where they are called useless and don't have any potential at all. Some leaders talk behind a [Service member's] back, and it is awful.

—Enlisted Man

I come from a more professional career field like legal and medical, so you are not going to see a lot of that behavior, other than the inherent bias that we face every day. But definitely in maintenance and places like that where discrimination is more blatant.

—Female Officer

I think that everyone has heard the horror stories about cops and maintenance. So, when you think about gender discrimination, I think you are going to think about cops and maintenance, and everyone in those specialties here shook their head yes.

—Enlisted Man

I was in the infantry before I commissioned. In infantry, before when I was in, they [women] weren't allowed. That's definitely somewhere where it could be more of an issue. I haven't been involved with it [infantry] for a while, so I can't speak to how it's evolved.

—Male Officer

Weapons, maintenance, or ammo, I'd expect to see more sexual assault and sexual harassment because, like he was saying, an all-male team, throw them in.... I'm in intel[ligence] and don't really see that.

—Male Officer

6. Participants in some groups described sexual harassment as a form of gender discrimination in their Service

When providing examples of gender discrimination, participants in some groups described instances of sexual harassment. This discussion included examples of how men's experiences of sexual harassment are not taken as seriously as women's experiences and examples of how servicewomen are subjected to being sexualized by their peers.

Another thing I see is with gender and discrimination—it wouldn't be two males investigated for an inappropriate relationship, like a male NCO and male NCO. But a male NCO and a female who is struggling with fitness, and he's helping her work on it, going to the gym. ... If you pay special attention, everyone is like, "They're hooking up" or having an inappropriate relationship. It keeps men from extending an offer where to any other [Service member], they would be helping them.

—Enlisted Woman

I've been in for over a year, and in [training] I progressed fast. I was the honor grad in boot camp. I had a schoolmate who asked if I was sucking off the instructor. Why would you say that to me? You don't know me. They would ask me that! It's no, I studied; you never see me outside of my room. That's all I do; I go and study.

—Enlisted Woman

After I finished my divorce, my female leadership encouraged another [Service member] to sleep with me because, as she said, "I was back on the market." I don't think that's right, and when I went to report it, I was told that I was overthinking it and that she was just joking.

—Enlisted Man

When it comes to comments about sex and sexuality, women do get off easier on that stuff because when a man makes a comment like that, it's taken a lot more seriously. There is actually a case like that right now with stuff going on [in our unit].

—Enlisted Man

7. Participants in some groups felt gender discrimination was improving in their Service

Participants in some groups felt gender discrimination was improving in their Service. Officers were more likely to express this opinion than enlisted personnel.

There has to be a cultural shift. I've noticed it from when I joined the [Service] to now. There have been positive cultural changes, but I don't really credit the [Service]'s policies. I credit old men leaving the [Service]. A win is a win. I am happy to see the new parental leave policies; I got 6 weeks with my first child, and then I took my own leave for 4 weeks. Now women are getting 3 months. I'm not jealous; I'm happy. It's great. As people get used to that and culture changes, the culture will take time.

—Female Officer

It's come a long way. Is there a specific thing to do for it? Probably not. We are very diverse; we have different cultures and different situations growing up. I don't know. We're moving in the right direction for what we need coming in; it's changed quite a bit.

—Enlisted Woman

It's gotten better. I think the training was often on the gender discrimination thing—a lot of it comes with accessing the culture those onesies and twosies come from. It seems like we have a better group coming in [to the Service] ...

—Male Officer

G. Impact of Gender Discrimination

DACOWITS was interested in learning how gender discrimination affects units and servicewomen's career progression. Participants in most groups felt gender discrimination affected unit cohesion, morale, and readiness and also discussed how leaders play a significant role in determining how gender discrimination affects an individual or their career. Participants in some groups also discussed the impact gender discrimination can have on the individual and on servicewomen's desire to stay in the military.

1. Participants in most groups felt gender discrimination would affect unit cohesion, morale, and readiness

When participants were asked how gender discrimination affects unit climate, participants in most groups said gender discrimination affects unit cohesion and morale and discussed how this type of climate affects unit readiness.

What I've seen in specific [units] is someone in a higher rank being a ring leader and then leads other people to poor behavior in the lower ranks, breeding an "us versus them" mentality that begins until you empower them through command climate survey. The lower ranks get out of the [Service] because it turns it into a job and not a service. They suffer through it until they can get out unless there was an outlet to make those complaints, especially anonymously to make the complaint. Production, cohesion, everything tears down, and people don't feel good about their job. They don't have pride in what they are doing; no matter how talented, they won't be able to perform at a higher level.

—Male Officer

I mean, like I said before, I haven't seen it. But like, with discrimination, like with anything, it would make that [Service member's] life more stressful, and they'd have a lot more to think about, and retention would probably be lower, and morale. I wouldn't want to sit at work every day and experience discrimination.

—Enlisted Man

I think it [gender discrimination] would affect camaraderie, and that would affect the workflow in a way. I have a good relationship with people at work, and if I can't communicate with my fellow peers about basic information that should get passed that could come down to my junior [Service members] ...; if I have a staff NCO that's a woman and she can't talk to me, that affects the unit. [Expletive] rolls downhill is a thing.

—Enlisted Man

It [gender discrimination] kills the morale. No one wants to work or come to work.

—Enlisted Woman

It's just going to affect being able to accomplish the mission. One person goes down regardless of rank or gender, it could be the difference between someone coming home or not. That's dramatic, but that's where it could go.

—Enlisted Man

It's a problem multiplier; it feeds into other things.

—Enlisted Woman

2. Participants in the majority of the groups said leaders play a significant role in how much gender discrimination affects an individual or their career

When participants were asked how, if at all, gender discrimination affects servicewomen's career progression, participants in the majority of the groups said leaders play a significant role in how much gender discrimination affects an individual or their career. Service members cited leaders' responsibility for critical aspects of military careers, including performance evaluations, training opportunities, and personnel assignments.

Sometimes if I know that I'm getting a new boss, I'm afraid, as a woman. (Other focus group participants nod in agreement). Because, if you aren't on a similar life plan [as them], like, they have kids, or don't have kids, or are married, or aren't married, that could affect how they view me.

—Female Officer

If you have a sexist supervisor over a young female, it could very quickly stunt your career. If it makes it to the point where it stops your career, it's hard to prove they stopped you from getting TDYs. You don't get put up for medals, or your package isn't put up as well. With sexists, like he (other focus group participant) said, it has to be stomped out quick, and if you experience it ...; with people's careers—if someone said I was planning to do 20 (years), now I'm going to do 4, it's because of the horrible experience with that supervisor. It could easily affect it.

—Male Officer

If you're undermined by your supervisors and leaders, then your subordinates or peers will not see you as equal or value added at all. Then of course you're not going to progress. You could be awesome, but if you're not valued by the unit, you're not.

—Enlisted Woman

Gender in my opinion—gender discrimination can impact a unit because if someone in a leadership position displays that it's going to make other people in other positions feel like it's okay because they are supposed to be the example, and they are doing something like this. If this person is able to do it, I can do it too. It's not setting a good example.

—Enlisted Man

The variation in leadership. Because if they have a good leader in one [unit] but then come to another where they are treated differently, even if it's not just discrimination, it could be yelling or whatever, and that could lead to feeling like a hinderance.

—Enlisted Man

Something it [gender discrimination] affects is evals [evaluations]. If the guy gets to go on a detachment and they want that guy, then it's not on my eval. I'm not trained. I'm waiting for my opportunity. I can't show I've done anything that way.

—Enlisted Woman

It could benefit them; it just depends on the circumstances. Because if they are getting special treatment, then they will do well, but if you have someone that doesn't think females deserve things, then it could deter their career.

—Enlisted Man

I think it would also be luck of draw based on who your rater is; that particular person has biases and can play favorites. It might not be that system-wide progression is being cut down, but particular biases of a rater could affect someone's progression.

—Male Officer

3. Participants in some groups felt gender discrimination affects retention, particularly for servicewomen

Participants in some groups said gender discrimination affects the retention of servicewomen due to women being held to a higher standard than men and having to work harder to advance in their careers. Men were more likely to express this opinion than women.

I think if a woman feels discriminated against because of her gender, it's pretty unlikely she will want to stay in. That seems obvious to me, but I think other people who witness it too—they can see this isn't an organization I would want to be part of because of this. I haven't had personal experience with it or spoken with anyone who has an experience with it. It's that would come from the top down.

—Male Officer

A lot of our highly regarded [Service members] are actually women, and, if anything, I've seen that women have a higher standard they have to meet compared to the male [Service members], who don't put in as much effort but receive the same recognition. I've also seen in the promotion boards where women are compared to other women, rather than women being compared to the rest of the group. So, it is like they are pitting women against each other rather than comparing them to the group. So, I've seen a lot of competition, even in leadership, to motivate women to outperform each other.

—Female Officer

Absolutely, there is a lot of pressure to do well; they have a lot of pressure on them. I know some of them have gotten out because of the drama that gets wrapped into the unit, and they don't want to do that anymore. It's hard to change [your] MOS to what they want to do, so they just get out.

—Enlisted Man

4. Participants in some groups felt gender discrimination personally discourages those experiencing it, negatively affecting their sense of self and their career

When asked how gender discrimination affects unit climate and culture, participants in some groups discussed how gender discrimination discourages the individuals experiencing it and how this discouragement can negatively affect a Service member's sense of self and their career.

It's exhausting. I don't know how many times a day someone says something inappropriate. I was the only female [in a large command]. All the men will say they respected me and loved me, but they had a bad way of showing it every day. Every day it was a fight; you have to find your grit. My job is to give people advice every day. For the first part of my career, I was too young to be a[n] [occupation] or to tell them what to do, but now I'm not too young. It's exhausting, and to [another focus group member's] point, some refer to me as a female [Service] officer, but there is a senior enlisted male who calls me "mama." Then he says I'm more exciting when I fight back, but I'm just doing my job as well as I could. Some days I just don't have the fight in me after 14 years.

—Female Officer

I feel like female [Service members], they get discouraged; it affects them. You are not confident in your job as a [Service member] as a whole. You don't want to make decisions, and you don't know if it's right or wrong.

—Enlisted Woman

It's discouraging.... If you're working on something and going about it logically, and they say you have an attitude and just go to your male counterpart, that's just discouraging. It's like I can't even fight for my [Service members] because I'm a girl, and you think I have an attitude.

—Enlisted Woman

It's depletive.

—Male Officer

H. Comfort and confidence in reporting gender discrimination

DACOWITS was also interested in knowing if participants felt comfortable reporting gender discrimination and if they felt confident their leadership would address issues of gender discrimination. Participants in most groups said they felt comfortable reporting issues of gender discrimination, or they were confident these issues would be addressed. However, many participants highlighted the significant role leaders play in the discrimination-reporting process and discussed how their comfort with and confidence in reporting gender discrimination depend on their leadership.

1. Participants in a majority of the groups reported feeling comfortable bringing up issues of gender discrimination to their leadership

Participants in the majority of groups said they would feel comfortable bringing up or discussing issues of gender discrimination with their leadership.

Absolutely comfortable, yes. If I didn't feel comfortable, I would go to the next leader. I would absolutely discuss it.

—Female Officer

I'm pretty comfortable with it. Wrong is wrong, and I have no issue voicing that tactfully, respectfully and reading the room with how to address and not address issues. I'm pretty comfortable expressing my concern if it's happening within an organization.

—Enlisted Woman

Yeah, absolutely, if I did see it. Most of the women I work with I've known for years now, or I've known them ever since I joined. So it's one of those things, like, what would you do if it's one of your friends getting messed with? My chain of command would do whatever they need to do to resolve the issue.

—Enlisted Man

It's much easier now.

—Male Officer

I do it all the time.

—Male Officer

2. Participants in over half the groups said their comfort with discussing issues of gender discrimination would depend on their current leadership and command climate

Participants reported their comfort with bringing up or discussing issues of gender discrimination would depend on their leadership and their command climate. Women were more likely to express these opinions than men. Female participants in a few groups also said their comfort level would depend on their own rank and position in the chain of command.

I think it depends on the climate and the unit you're at, and that changes with every commander and every switch-out of the personnel.

—Enlisted Man

For our [unit], we have our first female XO and [other senior leader], so having women in that chain of command makes it easier for junior female officers to talk to them. But for other commands that don't have women in those higher [leadership] areas, it can be harder. It's harder to talk to male commanding officers about those issues. Our [unit] is unique in that way. There is a high percentage of women, but other [units] don't have that.

—Female Officer

There are good leaders and bad leaders, so it depends on who the leader is at the time.

—Male Officer

I think for the most part, we can sit here and say we would be comfortable with bringing that up, but the reality is my organization specifically—there are no females in the leadership positions, not as [unit] commander, Sergeant Major, or executive officer. My organization has not been gender-integrated at all. Personally, I do feel comfortable [saying something] if that situation arose.

—Male Officer

My current chain of command, I could bring up problems all day, every day. They would be receptive to it, but that's not every chain of command. It's dependent on leadership.

—Female Officer

I'm more comfortable as I've gained experience in the [Service]. I say things as company commander that I wouldn't say as a Lieutenant because I might have an obligation to [Service members] or that I care less what people think now, but I feel like my rank as a Captain affords me more comfortability to have those discussions as opposed to a female Private. I was not an enlisted [Service member]. I can walk into a battalion commander and be like, "Check it out, sir!" A junior enlisted [Service member]—I have one female NCO in my company. Maybe that person may feel a different type of way, but I've gotten more comfortable as I gain more experience.

—Female Officer

In the rank I'm currently in, it's easy to have those conversations. Earlier, I could have had those conversations, but I don't know if... it seems like more people are listening. Before, I think I would be less likely to think something would happen.

—Enlisted Woman

3. Participants in some groups said they would be uncomfortable discussing issues of gender discrimination with their current leadership

Some participants reported they would be uncomfortable discussing issues of gender discrimination with their current leadership. Participants in these groups said their discomfort was based on concerns they would not be taken seriously or confusion over the type of behaviors considered to be gender discrimination. Some participants in these groups also provided examples of backlash they said would prevent them from making a future report. Women were more likely than men to provide these opinions.

When you're a [senior enlisted] as a mechanic—I had a leader who was racist and sexist. I made a report. During that period, he was very quiet, but once nothing came of it, it was like he was released. He continued to be sexist and racist again, and on top of that, I was told I was being sensitive. That I took it too far. [They said], "He was joking. You should know your [rank]." Nothing happened to him. And it's difficult to say, use your resources if nothing is going to happen. It feels pointless.

—Enlisted Woman

I would say that it is hard to bring up stuff about women with other men. For example, I told my command that I was coming to this focus group, and they were like, "Oh, I don't want you there." They know we are complaining about things, and it's just hard to be a woman and talk about issues with a man.

—Female Officer

It's a hard thing to nail down ... for anything if you're getting discriminated against. Any hesitation I would have would be, I don't know, they treat us all bad, and I don't know what the reason is, so unless it's explicit, I wouldn't feel comfortable bringing it up if I'm not sure if this is the exact reason. If I had a good idea of some kind of problem, then I would feel comfortable bringing it up. I don't think people have a problem bringing it up, but it's a matter of trying to find out what the explicit that are happening are.

—Male Officer

4. Participants in more than half the groups said they were confident their current leaders would address issues of gender discrimination

Participants in more than half the groups said they were confident their current leadership would address issues of gender discrimination. Men were more likely than women to provide this response. Participants in these groups mentioned their confidence was based on a positive example of when a leader had addressed an issue of discrimination. Some participants felt that not addressing gender discrimination would reflect poorly on their leadership or that there would be ramifications for a leader if they did not address the discrimination.

With other examples of discrimination, not gender, they were taken super seriously. They were investigated and handled appropriately, so I think issues of gender discrimination would be handled the same way.

—Enlisted Man

I'd be afraid not to report something at this point, especially with how things have changed in the last 8 to 10 years. (Others focus group participants nod their head in agreement.) Your career is at risk if you don't report it.

—Male Officer

I can see with my current unit that it would definitely be addressed. In our morning huddles, we have had issues come up, and those are issues that are talked about in those huddles, and so I'm very confident in my leadership addressing that.

—Enlisted Man

I'd say fairly confident too. I didn't experience it, but I heard a story from an instructor who started mouthing off to a female student. He got fired. The whole class blamed the dude. He had years in the [Service]; they did the right thing. So I'm fairly confident if there was a big issue, [it would be handled].

—Male Officer

5. Participants in most groups said their confidence that the issues of gender discrimination would be handled would depend on the situation or their current leadership

Some participants reported their confidence that gender discrimination would be addressed depends on the details of the situation or the perceptions and personal beliefs of their leadership.

I'm less likely to bring it up if that person can affect your career in a certain way. I wouldn't tell my leader because I want to make Lieutenant Colonel. If there was something so egregious, I would use the EO [equal opportunity] process as a closed-door thing because I know the effect they can wield with the stroke of a pen on my career. It's easy to do, and it's easy to hide.

—Female Officer

Not confident. If you don't address it, they won't take the approach to address it themselves. That's unit-dependent. Every organization has a different leader; some are willing to take a stand, and some aren't. It's organization-dependent.

—Enlisted Woman

I believe it depends a lot on the type of person you go to. You might get a resolution, or the situation keeps going on, but if it's a person they are close with, because some units are tight-knit, they might say they wouldn't expect the person to be like that. But if they act like that, they are enabling the behaviors to happen if someone close to you isn't held accountable in the same way as someone else. When female [Service members] are discriminated against and they sought help, they were kicked to the curb or moved to another unit; that situation isn't being handled. It's just being pushed to someone else or swept under the rug.

—Enlisted Man

It depends on leadership and the person that's bringing it up and how they. ... Myself, I wouldn't have an issue at all if there was a problem, but for others, they might.

—Male Officer

6. Participants in over half the groups said they were not confident leaders would address issues of gender discrimination

Participants in over half the groups said they were not confident their leadership would address issues of gender discrimination. Participants shared they were not confident because they did not think addressing discrimination would be a priority for their leadership, their leadership would not take the issues seriously, or their leadership was uncomfortable discussing these types of issues. Women were more likely to express these opinions than men.

I think it's [my confidence in the issue being addressed] low because some of our leaders are men and their mindset is, "Oh, that is men just being men." And they don't see it as a serious issue; they just see it as some people liking to joke.

—Female Officer

What I find a lot is we just move someone to another [unit] and think that makes things better. That just allows the problem to continue. In some sections, there is a lack of accountability. I've seen people held accountable and things moved aside. I'm like, "How are you still in?" It's because they're pushed around and no one actually assesses the problem.

—Enlisted Woman

I think in my experience right now, it seems like the individuals in leadership positions would feel comfortable and confident addressing it. It's all the individuals that work with the primary instructors—those are the ones that would have the most difficulty with it from what I've experienced. I talked about this with someone in my unit; it's a good ol' boys club. Most of them are senior enlisted where they have seen that time before women were integrated. I'm not speaking on their behalf; I'm speaking on how I perceived it. They want to keep it that way based on what I've heard from conversations with them and conversations hearing them talk to each other.

—Male Officer

I. Participant Recommendations to Address Gender Discrimination

DACOWITS asked focus groups participants for recommendations on how their Service could better prevent or address gender discrimination. Participant recommendations included improving and

expanding on the existing equal opportunity training, focusing on leaders and leadership, creating training on soft skills such as empathy and emotional intelligence, reexamining the equal opportunity complaint process, and consolidating and marketing existing resources.

1. Participants in half the groups recommended improving the current equal opportunity training

Participants recommended improving the current equal opportunity training, including making the training a mandatory requirement and incorporating lessons on implicit bias, stereotypes, and privilege. Participants also recommended these trainings should be more inclusive and interactive.

I recommend we don't just make this a click-through training about discrimination. Like putting a whole command in a room and saying, "Be nice to females"—that isn't going to work. That's the [Service]'s response usually.

—Female Officer

Changes to how we could do EO classes. They are cookie-cutter; they don't bring in current literature and arguments for diversity, equity, and inclusion for women, people of color, many things. It's just, "Don't discriminate; these are protected categories." It's not a discussion of what equity means. ... There is not enough discussion on equity versus equality; there is a difference. ... They check the box with EO training. Equity is not everyone starting from the same place; that's a huge point of discussion.

—Female Officer

When this topic comes up, it's always males discriminating against females, but it absolutely happens to men too. So, I think by being open and honest about it happening to everyone and having both examples; it makes people actually listen and take notice.

—Enlisted Man

I think part of the issue is identifying it. We may see it as different levels of intent and contest it. And depending on other factors, like rank and who's involved, it could be difficult to take action. There's, "How do I define it?" Then calling it out. Then step three, taking action, and measure against the person who is doing it, and then if in fact they're doing it, how do you prevent it from happening in the future? The people who are offenders are going to offend, and I think we need a better way of seeing it when it's occurring.

—Male Officer

Do more awareness of it. We do suicide and sexual assault prevention training every single year because it's dictated that we do that. Why don't we do more that adds onto it? That this is gender discrimination. Because we all come from different cultures and different places, and we could think that something is okay or doesn't matter when it actually does.

—Enlisted Man

I was going to say that we can't do it (discriminate). That's already in place; we can't just discriminate against people. So, the only thing I can think of, making sure the training is up to date because, especially junior [Service members], those are the people that are less likely to speak up and speak out. They may be less likely to know they are being discriminated against and that it's not okay this is happening to them. So, the training helps them know their resources and that they should go to their NCO and have that [a complaint] routed up and knowing the left and right lateral limits of when we draw the line.

—Enlisted Man

2. Participants in some groups recommended focusing on leadership and leadership training to improve issues of gender discrimination

Participants also recommended focusing on leadership and leadership training to better address gender discrimination in their Service. These recommendations included making leaders more aware of female standards in the military and also helping leaders become more comfortable and confident when addressing sensitive issues. Women were more likely to bring up this type of recommendation than men.

I'd say general education for leaders. I've known leaders at low and high levels that prefer not to have a female [Service member] because they aren't aware of things, simple things, like hair regulations. And rather than educating themselves to know how to better lead a female [Service member], they would prefer not to have them.

—Enlisted Man

The DoD ... I would like to see someone buy into what Brené Brown teaches. There is a lot to be learned from the type of leadership and mentorship training she gives, and we need to be able to have this conversation and invite the men into this conversation. They're part of the problem and solution. There are men out there advocating for women, but we need to have the conversations and normalize it. I need to be able to say to my boss, that isn't a way to talk about pregnant women, and I'm not going to file a complaint, but it's wrong.

—Female Officer

I don't know what could be done. I would like to see command teams reassured that they don't have to submit a [Service regulation for investigations] for gossip or rumors. You can't shut it down and go back to work? "Oh, they are sleeping together." Don't you have something better to do than talk about what's going on behind closed doors? The command feels they have to investigate it. Empower the command team to clarify what types of things are against the rules and what should be investigated, so you can shut things down and do what you can and improve the climate.

—Enlisted Woman

3. Participants in some groups recommended creating a soft skills training to teach Service members how to address difficult topics from a place of empathy and genuine care

Participants also recommended a new type of training focused on soft skills, noting this training should teach Service members how to address difficult topics from a place of empathy and genuine care. Women were more likely to make this recommendation than men.

I think empathy is a huge one. I see a lot of people lacking empathy, and it takes a lot to tell someone why they should be treating people equally without telling them all of the things that lead someone to be treated differently. You know when people are being genuine or when they are saying it because they think they have to say it. So, I think teaching people how to actually believe why they should be treating everyone equally. (Other focus group participants nod affirmatively.)

—Female Officer

Training classes on how to build a team because combat MOSs are open to women. In the [Service] boot camp, respect for team members is not there for both males and females.

—Enlisted Woman

Let leaders lead and engage in that stuff. I think face-to-face works better than surveys. I know surveys generate questions, but we have to be able to ask those questions. When the BLM [Black Lives Matter] protests were happening, the [Service] encouraged us to have open conversations about gender, pregnancy, and race.

—Enlisted Man

4. Participants in a few groups recommended bolstering and strengthening the equal opportunity complaint process

Participants recommended bolstering and strengthening the equal opportunity complaint process to address concerns about backlash and retaliation and also to avoid confusion about what behaviors can and cannot be reported. Men were more likely to make this recommendation than women.

We heard from three people here who made an EO complaint, and nothing was done. After I filed an EO complaint about a male senior leader who treated two females differently, it was handed in, and I was later told I should not have done that. I should have brought it to them so they could make it go away. ... You have to socialize it earlier on. It's like a puppy. You have to handle it before it's set in its way.

—Enlisted Woman

The EO program is, it's almost kind of weaponized against people, and maybe some of the higher-ranking [Service members] in this room would know this better.

—Enlisted Man

I'll say, a lot of sleazy individuals have learned not to say it, so they're doing it behind closed doors and start playing the long game. I've had females tell me they feel like something is happening to them, and I say, "I'll be with you (the next time you're around that person)," and that person doesn't do it. If there is a way to just be anonymous and notify command and say, "Hey, I have no evidence or proof except word of mouth that Sergeant X or Captain C is having an issue with a female [Service member]."... If there is a way we could communicate with each other about that ...

—Male Officer

Let's face it, the things that get prioritized are our jobs and performance ratings and education, your PME. So as long as that person I was told to keep an eye on didn't turn in a bad performance report..., the impact of saying this Sergeant was a jerk is irrelevant. I can't kick people out because they are jerks. If we did that, the [Service] would be quite slim.

—Male Officer

5. Male participants in some groups recommended consolidating and marketing resources about gender discrimination

Male participants in some groups noted how many resources addressed gender discrimination and improving gender equality in their Service. These participants recommended resources be consolidated into an easily accessible location and marketed to all Service members. Male enlisted personnel were more likely to suggest this than male officers.

To figure out the regulations, the amount of time we have to keep on studying, and as you move up in rank—now I'm supposed to know this regulation and this regulation. There's not enough time to study if you want to be competitive in some units. That's a simple thing we don't talk about in an infantry [unit], but there are not many females. When one shows up, if we don't know it, so we don't bring it up. A simple piece like hair regulations—as long as their hair looks good, it looks professional, it's fine. It's not actually knowing it [the regulation]. For those [units] that don't interact with females much, something like what [another focus group participant] mentioned would be helpful.

—Enlisted Man

Going back to the regulation and policy piece, the not knowing. There's a million things in the [Service] we don't know. It would be helpful moving forward to have a portal for specifically female regulations. The majority of the [Service], we know male regulations on hair and stuff. But lately they've been adding, and it's difficult to know the latest.

—Enlisted Man

Actually get the resources out there. All they do is give out water bottles and tell us they are here if they need us.

—Enlisted Man

I don't know if you can prevent it, just like you can't prevent a lot of things in society. But to the point about the avenues and measures in place for reporting, if you make them available and advertise them, they will help. Some of this is personality driven too, but if leadership is behind them and make sure people know about them, they will help. ... Prevention, I don't know, but I would say bolstering them could be valuable.

—Enlisted Man

Chapter 5. General Comments

At the conclusion of each focus group, DACOWITS asked participants a shared set of general questions intended to provide space for participants to discuss other issues affecting women in the military not already covered by the topical protocol. Participants were asked about the biggest challenge women face in the military today, recommendations they would send to the Secretary of Defense, and any other thoughts related to servicewomen they would like to share (see Appendix C).

When time permitted, participants in all 48 focus groups were asked these questions, including focus groups with enlisted Service members (E3–E8) and officers (O1–O5/W1–W5). This chapter summarizes the most common themes from these general questions and is organized into the following sections:

- ▶ Biggest challenges for women in the military today
- ▶ Participants' recommendations for the Secretary of Defense

Several themes covered in this chapter were also addressed by participants as they discussed the primary topics for each focus group.

A. Biggest Challenges for Women in the Military Today

As it has done in past years, DACOWITS asked both male and female participants to identify the biggest challenges women face in the military today. The most common challenges participants reported included pregnancy, balancing work and family life, sexism, child care, and how sexual harassment and sexual assault are handled.

1. Participants in nearly half the groups reported pregnancy as the biggest challenge servicewomen face today

Although pregnancy was an explicit topic in one of the 2023 focus group protocols this year (see Chapter 4), it also came up as the most frequently cited challenge for women serving in the military today. Participants described how pregnancy is disruptive to servicewomen's career progression because of the time away from work, the loss of key operational milestones or training opportunities, and the stigma of pregnancy in the military. Participants also raised recovery following pregnancy and birth as a pregnancy challenge, including the lack of additional time for recovery from difficult births and the stress servicewomen face during the postpartum period as they work to meet physical fitness and body composition standards.

I haven't experienced this, but I've seen my [Service members] experience it. I had a motivated [Service member] that got married, had a baby, and now doesn't think she will reenlist because she said, "The [Service] gave up on me when I had a kid." We acknowledge the retention rate of [Service] mothers is very low, and now we have maternity leave, but once they get integrated back into the unit, they are like, "We don't want to touch you; you're still breastfeeding." And with all the time out of the system, it's just hard.

—Female Officer

My personal experience is, I am pregnant right now. When I told my male counterparts that I had been trying for 4 years and told them I'm finally pregnant, I got met with "You're joking right" and "Please tell me you're joking." They weren't supportive. I got ostracized. I wasn't invited to anything because they didn't think I'd be at the command much longer. I'm responsible for the pregnant females at my command now, and I see that happen a lot. Now I say, "You will not treat our [Service members] this way."

—Female Officer

For me, between maternity leave and convalescent leave, I took a big chunk out of my reporting period, and I feel as though that time should not be graded. It almost felt like my career came to a screeching halt, and I kept waiting and waiting to have a child, but even then, the year I had my daughter, it was very obvious that time was missing. Even when I was trying to front load. ... There is no way to explain that I took half a year to create a person.

—Enlisted Woman

I think starting a family is tough. Especially for women. They get looked down on. I've seen it. You get pregnant, and you get pulled from your job. If you have a good command, you're put somewhere where you can be useful and get recognition, but if you have a bad command, you get put in a hole. It's like a year and a half from pregnancy to when you come back to work.

—Enlisted Man

I was pregnant last summer. I had to cut my operational tour short. I was questioned about why I was there, told I was borrowed goods, and told about school opportunities I wouldn't be able to do now. I had written correspondence that I wouldn't promote because of this accident. It hasn't changed.

—Female Officer

If you come in pregnant, you do the best job you can, but you aren't contributing equally, and it's difficult to rank and compare you fairly. You don't want to boost them up because they got pregnant. You don't want it to be, if you get pregnant, we will promote you because we don't want it to hurt you. How do you compare apples and oranges? No one I have seen is intentionally doing a woman a disservice, but it's difficult, and I don't have a good recommendation. The [Service] does have a lot of things in place to help people out.

—Male Officer

The hardest thing for a female in the military is if career is more important or family. If she wants to start a family ..., she has lost almost 3 years of her career with schools, pregnancy, and maternity leave, and then when she comes back, whether she is breast or formula feeding, she will miss out on things because she chose to have a family.

—Enlisted Man

The [Service] puts emphasis on "Are you deployable or not?" If you are pregnant, you are not deployable; if you break your leg, you are not deployable. If you step off training, you are behind your peers. You have missed deployment or missed a position, or you can't take the position because you can't deploy. You can't make that up when you are an officer. You can't miss a KD [key developmental] position because you are behind everyone else who already did it.

—Male Officer

Adding that extra stress on women to get back into the standard after pregnancy when they're trying to get back into the swing of work. That struggle can appear negative to the supervisors, or, if they're a staff NCO, they are supposed to lead by example, and if they can't do that [get back into standards], it can be stressful. I know they have that one year to get back in shape, but I've seen a lot of stress.

—Male Officer

I had an emergency C-section. I had to go on my own online to get back to where I was and to find resources. They have pregnancy [physical fitness] resources, but the resources and evaluation are not where it should be with that. To get back to my normal self, to be where I wanted to be, I had to do it on my end.

—Female Officer

I have twins, and I needed more time to recover, and it looks the same. There is no way for me to explain that I didn't just have a kid; I had two.

—Enlisted Woman

2. Participants in nearly half of all groups felt balancing work and family life was the biggest challenge servicewomen face today

Balancing work and family life was raised by participants in nearly half of all groups as one of the biggest challenges servicewomen face today. Participants often framed it as a “choice,” whether it is a determination of where to place one’s energy on any given day or, more broadly, as a choice between military service and participation in their family’s lives.

The challenges women face, we are told work-life balance, but I don't believe in that concept. You make a choice about prioritizing; there's not a balance. You are losing at being a great [Service] officer, being a good mom, being a good wife. Today, I chose the [Service]. Today, I choose being a mom. That's the way it is on the weekends; I am checked out as much as possible because Monday through Friday I don't have a choice. ... It's a lie Murphy Brown told us—you can't have it all. All you have to do is try hard and allocate your time better, but that's not the reality to tell young women officers to do that.

—Female Officer

Deciding whether or not they [servicewomen] want to have a career and a family.

—Male Officer

Because of how me and my husband chose to live, I go way over and beyond to try not to be that person. If things are coming up, like a conference, I will fly in a grandparent or try to do something to where they watch my daughter, so I'm not like, “I can't be there for that,” so I'm not seen as someone you can't rely on.

—Enlisted Woman

I'm close to retirement and want to throw in the towel. I just got out of maternity leave in January, and my children have had COVID, RSV [respiratory syncytial virus], COVID again, and scarlet fever, and I'm like, I can't do everything. I have the most amazing boss, and I have not been at work for a full month. I'm always teleworking, and [at my unit] when I walk in, it's now like, “Oh, you work here?” and that sucks because I was meritoriously promoted.

—Female Officer

At some point, every female has personal pride in how much they are able to achieve, and if you can't succeed in being a wife, a mother, and [Service member], you have to make a choice and decide if you are going to be mediocre overall or you're going to make a choice. Like, you give me 12 weeks of maternity leave, great! But my kid doesn't remember that. I pulled myself out of command work because I can't be there for my kid and my [Service members].

—Female Officer

You just have to make a choice. My mom moved up and supported me when I had my first kid, and I can't imagine being a single [Service member] who has a kid and has to take them to the CDC. I don't think they should get a pass either and be promoted at the same way if they are missing work, but you have to make a choice, and we don't talk about that.

—Female Officer

For me as a female in the military, I'm hitting that 10-year mark, but the time on my contract ends, and the biggest issue is family and work balance. With daycare, I get home, and I'm still at work, a different kind of work, but work for the family. ... Females have a different set of worries than their male counterparts at home even have, in my opinion. ... It's like, sometimes I'm a mama bear in both locations, at times because I am the only female in my shop.

—Female Officer

I have two FT [full-time] jobs. I do this all day and still continue to do it. My phone is on; I will answer it at 3 a.m. if you call me, but I have three children at home, and they don't always get my full attention. My husband is a shift worker, and he held it down while I was deployed; he did great. Mr. Dad doesn't have the same worries when he comes home, not in the [Service].

—Female Officer

3. Participants in some groups raised sexism as the biggest challenge servicewomen face today

Participants in some groups raised sexism as the biggest challenge women in the military face today. While some participants directly named sexism, others described forms of sexism, including differential treatment based on gender and cultural norms that devalue women. Enlisted personnel were more likely than officers to raise this as a concern.

Sexism. There's a lot of sexist men in the military who degrade women.

—Enlisted Woman

... My wife is a [MOS], and sexist comments are a big thing. People ... they say really nasty stuff, and nobody says anything; they laugh it off. If they don't speak up, then who am I?

—Enlisted Woman

A lot of women don't feel safe here; they feel their voices are unheard. They can't be in the military too long before men make some type of advancement towards them. They feel like they don't belong. There was a female [Service member] I was in charge of on my team. There was a lot of time we used to have conversations like this in the field. It boils down to her feeling like she belongs without her feeling like we have to accommodate or treat her like she's a fragile being.

—Enlisted Man

The culture of [Service] still has remnants of "the [Service] is a man's place" that permeates and makes it harder for women interested in joining and women who are already in the [Service].

—Female Officer

Women do not get recognized for their achievements because they are seen as lower than what men are achieving, which affects everything.

—Enlisted Woman

Yes, all of the old-fashioned ideas and culture that are still lingering around that women are inferior regardless of a reason—that is a challenge.

—Enlisted Man

I asked a woman in my office in anticipation of a question like this, and she said that when she is a female leading a male, she is listened to less and is more disrespected. So, I don't know how we deal with that, but just making changes to ensure that women are respected in their leadership roles.

—Enlisted Man

There have been cases I have seen personally where there are groups or small [units] that are male-dominated, and we overcompensate and try to make her feel way too comfortable. Some of the things we say might be inappropriate or might affect the female; everyone drops quiet because we don't want to offend you. That makes individuals feel singled out and alone even though we are trying to protect their families.

—Enlisted Man

Too often we get wrapped around "that's a female." ... What the [expletive] are you talking about? She joined, I joined; get that [expletive] on, and let's go. If you treat people that way and holistically like that across the board, people will gravitate towards it; they will appreciate and enjoy it more.

—Enlisted Man

I would say double standards. If I'm very aggressive, I'm labeled as bossy or as a bitchy woman, and it's a double standard because if I'm being a leader, it's considered bossy or bitchy, but if a guy does it, they're just being a leader. It's a double standard.

—Enlisted Woman

Sexism. I experienced it.

—Enlisted Woman

4. Participants in some groups identified child care as the biggest challenge servicewomen face today

Child care was raised by participants in some groups as the biggest challenge women in the military face today. Women were more likely than men to provide this response. Participants reported a lack of available child care at CDCs on military installations as the most substantial issue with child care. Other participants described the high costs of child care, difficulty finding child care off base, challenges with frequent PCS moves, and long waitlists for CDCs.

The CDC at the beginning of the school year was completely undermanned. I am a single Active Duty mother. I was priority 1 for it, but they didn't have workers to take in more child care.

—Female Officer

Child care. Getting it for long enough, for enough hours.

—Male Officer

I had my child before I entered the military. Me and my husband wanted two or three children, and we haven't had another one because [of] the way you are seen when you get pregnant and finding child care. We couldn't afford to live or pay for daycare for more than one child. We are paying almost \$1,000 a month for one child to be in daycare. You get a discount; it's 10 percent. But I would be living in a cardboard box if I have more than one.

—Female Officer

Child care. It's hard to get child care in general. It's not necessarily access because the military does provide child care, but in [installation] it's a huge base, so it's hard for them to get into the CDC. We have a female [senior leader], but the CDC won't work around that 12-hour shift schedule where they have to come in at 3 a.m. I don't know anywhere you can drop your child at that time.

—Enlisted Man

For me it's child care. Each base I go to, I have to look at child care. Coming here it was hard to look for child care. There were no options on base, then trying to find places off base that were appropriate for my kid was rough.

—Enlisted Woman

I should have been top of the list, but I couldn't get care. I am going to male bosses that have stay-at-home wives, or they don't have children. My daughter starts at 8:00 a.m. and gets off at 2:30 p.m. My daughters can go to school, but it's not an all-day thing. As women who typically take care of kids, it's harder on us.

—Female Officer

We have CDCs, but the wait time can be 9 months to a year and a half to get your child in. So, getting them in there is impossible. You have to do that before you get to the command. Child care in town is expensive. There is a program that will help you pay for child care if you can't get into the CDC, but even that is a process to get.

—Enlisted Man

Child care. I'm seeing it in my office all the time: "I can't get child care in my area," or "I am the only one who can pick my kid up."

—Male Officer

Child care. That's a big thing. For single parents or partners who have custody of children, I think that's something to be looked at.

—Enlisted Woman

For child care, it's hard enough getting into a child care facility and establishing care there, but when you get PCS orders, then you have to start that again. So, you have to find it at your next station. So, you have to reestablish that every 2 to 3 years.

—Female Officer

A lot of dual-military families will have live-in nannies, but our junior [Service members] don't. They can't afford child care if they don't get a spot at CDC, and they can't go into town and afford the thousand dollars a month for safe, reliable child care. So, then we put that on our junior [Service members] who might not have the financial abilities. So that's another stressor for not just females but also males.

—Female Officer

5. Participants in some groups felt how sexual harassment and sexual assault are handled in the Military Services is the biggest challenge servicewomen face today

Participants in some groups felt the biggest challenge for women in the military today is how reports and claims of sexual harassment and sexual assault are not handled properly and with full accountability. Some participants shared their own experiences, while others shared the experiences of those in their units. Enlisted personnel were more likely than officers to raise this as an issue.

Sexual harassment still. I was sexually harassed as a [senior enlisted rank] at my last command; it affected my eval. (Moderator: Did you report the issue?) I did; it went nowhere. I went through hell, and it destroyed me. I almost got out of the [Service] and said [expletive] my retirement, I'm done. I almost got out as a [rank]. People in my [unit] saw how I was getting cheated because the CO knew, and other leaders, they were aware; they were all buddies. It was a connected network; they were best friends. We have an open case of sexual harassment that has been unresolved for this wonderful [rank]. He transferred, and she doesn't have the motivation. I've watched her drive and motivation decline by the day. I've seen more sexual harassment as a [senior enlisted] than as a junior [Service member], which is really sad.

—Enlisted Woman

As a man, it seems like a lot of talk. ... It could be a place of ignorance, but I think it's a lot of talk. Everyone goes to the sexual assault training every year, but the stories I've heard—I've had a female [Service member] who was sexually assaulted who had medical proof and texts from the person [proving] that it happened. She was still told, "It's still not worth your time." Then to have to sit in the training and see it not be taken seriously—it's a big slap in the face as a woman.

—Enlisted Man

Two units ago, my leadership sexually assaulted me. I reported it, and I was told, "How can you do this?" I was told I should kill myself. They look out for their own.

—Enlisted Woman

I work in the EO office, and in that office we deal with sexual assault. ... If an investigation gets launched, it's done incorrectly, or it's done and the sexual assault actually happens; it gets swept under the rug. I've had females come up and say I think a sexual assault happened, but I don't think anything would get done. They heard stories of their commanders not doing anything. They heard these stories through the grapevine and research and found out the commander didn't do anything, and I think that's an impact.

—Enlisted Man

... Sexual harassment, it can get swept under the rug. It's who you are and who you know. At the command I'm at now, one of the [junior enlisted] females was approached by a male [peer] trying to be her [deployment] "boo," that when you're away you hook up, and she turned him down, but he was persistent, and she reported it, and nothing happened. To this day, that dude is the command's baby. He got an EP [early promote], and nothing happened. So yeah, sexual harassment.

—Enlisted Woman

The biggest challenge for women is the process for how certain claims are rectified. For example, for harassment, if a female is being harassed, it's reported. The CO will order that a preliminary investigation is done to see if there is enough evidence for a command investigation. And I understand there are checks and balances and stuff, but it's all about "he said, she said," and if there is no corroborating evidence, the command will say there is nothing they can do. However, there have been times where an individual has multiple stuff brought against them, and because there is no evidence against them, the [Service] will just be like, "There is nothing I can do," but they go off and do more stuff, and that female will feel dismissed. So, even when there is stuff to corroborate, when it comes to officers, I feel like the [Service] shouldn't allow the [Service] to investigate [its Service members]. I think there should be an outside investigation to determine whether or not they are guilty because it allows [Service members] to push it under the rug or give them a nonpunitive letter of caution, which is like, "You did a bad thing, and don't do it again," and there isn't any admin [administrative] paperwork. So, I don't think the [Service] should be doing investigations on individuals.

—Enlisted Man

I think sexual assault and sexual harassment and violence against women. I think specifically that the [sexual harassment and sexual assault] training is not sufficient. I don't think we should choose people that want a bullet on their performance evaluation to do the training. I think we need to have people that are trained to provide the training, and we should be looking into why men can look at women in their unit and see them as less than.

—Female Officer

I have experienced unfortunate encounters dealing with [sexual harassment and/or sexual assault]. It's [sexual harassment and sexual assault] and EO basically, but that also goes with the type of leadership you got too. I remember my first, before my current chain of command. There were the same complaints about my First Sergeant. The complaints were EO-related; they were not taking into consideration the "Joes" [slang for GI Joes] and women. It was more of a sexist commentary going around. There were inappropriate things being said even when I as a female was there; it was an uncomfortable environment. For me, it was more of an illegal act on my behalf, which leads to why I would caution my sisters to join any branch of the military. [Sexual harassment and sexual assault]... changes everything about you, not just your person. Wearing this uniform, it just makes you change how you see and how you work in the environment. For me, I had to leave. Being around an individual would make it harder for me do my job, and my company was male-dominated. I had no other female to go to. Not a female to go to vent or to talk it out with anyone like that. ... Having leadership to listen to a female. When they complain, when a female complains, it's not just her bickering; it's an actual problem to her.

—Enlisted Woman

So one of the biggest challenges I see that pushes a lot of female [Service members] out is [sexual harassment or sexual assault] incidents. Whether or not every one of them is intentional, if you have an MOS, you have female [MOS], and they come around infantry people—we talk a lot different! They may overhear it and take it a certain way. Not all incidents are intentional; someone may have overheard something. A lot of them in those other MOSs just overheard something. Sexual harassment is a really strong thing; people see it. But people don't speak up. They don't intervene when they see a [rank] talking to one of them and say to him, "You are harassing her." ... You have to be careful about the way you say things. That's a big deterrent; there's one incident, and you are done. They blame everyone.

—Enlisted Man

B. Participants' Recommendations for the Secretary of Defense

When participants were asked what recommendations they would make to the Secretary of Defense, numerous recommendations and topics emerged. Participants provided such a diverse range and volume of recommendations; the most prevalent themes occurred only in some groups. The most common recommendation themes included improving the availability and affordability of child care, increasing pay for all personnel, reducing the prevalence of sexual harassment and sexual assault in the military, and improving fertility and reproductive health benefits and care. Men were more likely than women to recommend increasing pay, while women were more likely to recommend increasing child care capacity, reducing sexual harassment and sexual assault, and increasing reproductive healthcare and fertility-related support.

1. Participants in some groups recommended improving the availability and affordability of child care

The most prevalent recommendation to the Secretary of Defense was related to the availability and affordability of child care, especially at CDCs on military installations. Participants felt the military's child care infrastructure should have better availability and capacity and better financial support for child care, especially when Service members must seek care in the local community. Participants noted the

impacts of child care issues on unit readiness. Women were more likely than men and enlisted personnel were more likely than officers to provide this recommendation.

... We spend billions of dollars on boondoggles every year. We should be able to pay for child care for every Service member.

—Male Officer

For me, child care. Child care is ridiculous. I have to go out in town where they don't have locks on the doors; I have to go to a place like that. My kid is unhappy about it, but there's nowhere else to go. It's a huge city of military kids. She is stuck at this place that is miserable, no videos, no locks on the doors. I don't know how they are transporting her because we are dual-military. Monday, Wednesday, and Friday I take her to school, but 2 days of the week, I don't know who is driving her to school, the route they take. I have no option; the CDC is full, and they prioritize dual-military. The school isn't in the zone here. We have nine other kids to get a bus to go to school. They won't open anything for us. They don't care that it's hard on us.

—Enlisted Woman

Increase the CDC capacity; the CDC waitlists are ridiculous. When we showed up, the CDC waitlist was like, don't even try. You might get in if you are a dual-military couple.

—Male Officer

The CDC is expensive, especially if you have more than one kid.

—Enlisted Man

Sometimes we work weekends too. Like [instructors], we have to go find our own daycare. It's not that you don't trust it, but we should be untrusting when we meet someone out in town or here on [installation]. It's hard for everyone. My son, who is 3 months old, is waking up at 5 a.m. to go to someone else's house because I have to take him off post for [physical fitness training], and they charge way more than the on [installation] care charges.

—Enlisted Woman

Child care issues. That puts a huge strain on my ability to do my job. This is our third base, and we just keep getting placed lower on the list. If one of our kids has to be picked up early, my wife can't do it because of her job. I've cut out of work early because a child was sick. I think child care needs to be addressed at a minimum. Tell 'em I said so.

—Male Officer

I would say same thing with resources. It should be more something I've seen myself dealing with child care. Especially OCONUS [outside the continental United States], you can't go out into the local economy and have your kid with anybody. The installation can only hold a certain amount of kids at a time. The alternate options is some type of program where there is family care so you're not walking around with two kids in the [unit]. Child care, that's the biggest thing I've seen. There are opportunities being passed up for the [Service member] who is a single parent; they can't go to certain schools or stay overnight. They can't go to these opportunities; they need time for their FCP. Just because you can't go because you're a single parent shouldn't mean you should miss your opportunity. If you're the best one to go, you should go without something outside of your job affecting it. We need to be resourced. We should be able to figure this out.

—Enlisted Man

2. Participants in some groups recommended increasing pay, especially due to persistent economic inflation and competition with civilian labor market pay

Another recommendation from focus group participants was to raise pay for all personnel. Participants noted aspects such as inflation, rising costs of housing, and pay in the civilian labor market as reasons the military should increase pay for personnel. Men were more likely than women to provide this recommendation.

... Have pay raises that match inflation. If you don't get a pay raise that matches inflation, that's not good.

—Male Officer

If they want more numbers, they should make our paychecks competitive with the civilian market or keep up with inflation at the very least. I didn't make a lot of money as a [junior enlisted rank].

—Enlisted Man

Close the gap on military and civilian pay rate, and you will end your recruitment issues. Some of us, we served because we love the country, but if I leave tomorrow, I can make more than six figures in the same exact civilian job.

—Male Officer

Increase the pay.

—Male Officer

The 3-percent raise is great, but inflation is way higher than 3 percent. That needs to be addressed severely.

—Female Officer

The pay is not cutting it.

—Enlisted Woman

In the civilian world, if you ask them to do more, they get paid more.

—Male Officer

The [Service] asks a lot from us: to take care of our families, to take care of the mission, to take care of our fitness, for a lot of things, to pursue education, to make rank, and that puts a lot of stress on us. Everyone here is undermanned. This guy [another focus group participant] has been deployed 8 times in 18 years, and there is no motivation to stay in. You want me to have a degree? Do I get an incentive to get a degree? Do I get more pay if I get a degree? I would in the civilian world but not here. So, I'm not going to do it without seeing it in my paycheck. Also, at the end of the day, I'll only be able to be in the [Service] for 30 years, so what am I going to do, sacrifice my family to be here?

—Enlisted Man

3. Participants in some groups recommended the Military Services need to better address sexual harassment and sexual assault, including prevention and response to these incidents

Participants in some groups recommended the Military Services need to better address sexual harassment and sexual assault. Recommendations included removing investigations from the chain of

command, better training to prevent these issues, increasing support for Service members who have filed a complaint, and ensuring justice and accountability. Women were more likely than men and enlisted personnel were more likely than officers to make this type of recommendation.

Fix the [sexual harassment and sexual assault] program. Take it out of the chain of command; give it to civilians who are trained and proficient in handling cases of sexual assault. It needs to come out of the chain of command's hands. They need to have special units for [sexual harassment and sexual assault]. This has been a problem since I joined, for you and every female in there. Females have been making complaints, even EO. I just recently experienced this. The moment she makes a complaint, the reprisal. It happens. I've seen with sexual harassment, but it just happened with EO. It's a real thing, and it needs to be fixed in this military.

—Enlisted Woman

Sexual assault training needs to be more. Coming from [international country], that's why I'm stationed here. [Service investigation unit] is supposed to contact you 48 hours after the incident is reported, but they didn't contact me until the day before I was supposed to fly out of there. They said my case slipped between the cracks. I begged for counseling and help, but I didn't receive that. It's a serious matter. If I have to be the voice to speak up for other women, I can do that.

—Enlisted Woman

When leaders fail, hold them accountable. And many times, I've seen this with officers. With legal actions, sexual assault, or physical assault, they get put into a staff job and 3 years later get put back as commanders again.

—Enlisted Man

One at the top of my head, not sure if this is an answer for this—but be better when it comes to [sexual harassment and sexual assault]. That's a really big one. When my friends and I talked about the [Service], they don't want to join, especially with Fort Hood. I know I am not sure what is going on in the Pentagon, whether they are paying attention to social media. The [Service] and social media outside, it's usually about sexual harassment and sexual assault. Also in relation to Fort Hood, it's really bad when it comes to recruiting.

—Female Officer

Punish accusers who are found lodging around false allegations as you would the accused. Military justice is not swift. Those false allegations are a career ruiner. The accusers oftentimes are not facing punishment.

—Male Officer

I don't think that command-directed investigations should include sexual harassment or EO cases, and they should all be referred outside of the command.

—Female Officer

In 2019, I went through a [sexual harassment/sexual assault] incident myself. The perpetrator was found guilty; he was my supervisor. He was liked amongst the entire [command]. As soon as I PCS'd, he went right back into the position. He's carrying on life as normal.

—Enlisted Woman

Males are afraid to interact with females because of false reporting. Females, false reporting does happen, and there needs to be repercussions so people can see false reporting has the same repercussions, so it's not used as an excuse that a male can't correct a female because they know a female cannot use [a complaint] as a weapon. It is being used as a weapon, but not as much as males say it is. But there needs to be justice on both sides.

—Enlisted Woman

4. Participants in some groups recommended better healthcare for women's reproductive health issues, including expanded coverage for fertility-related challenges

Participants recommended a range of better support for women's reproductive health issues, including expanded financial and medical support for fertility challenges and menopause.

Also covering reproductive healthcare. TRICARE does cover some but continuing to advocate for TRICARE coverage. Especially for women who put off having a family when they're younger because they want to prove themselves, but when they do get to that point, at the O5 and O6 level, when they want to have a family, it backfires.

—Female Officer

Medical care. There's no women's health clinic on base ...

—Female Officer

I'm very heavily strong on women's healthcare. Like in general, better investment in it for women going through pregnancy and choosing what they want ...

—Male Officer

More specialized training for physical therapists, nutritionists—not dietitians, and physician assistants assigned to clinics. There is something related to the physiology of a woman's body for prepregnancy and post-, in addition to those that don't have kids. ... And as I get closer to the menopause age, I need assistance to continue to maintain that strength and endurance. It looks different in different aspects of ages. I come from a family that is heavy weighted and big hips. I need experts to guide and coach what is good for my body type; that can help with the retention and recruitment aspects you are asking about. Someone who wants to stay longer to have kids but needs assistance for whatever is going on with their bodies and lives.

—Female Officer

I feel like there are considerations for women with a pregnancy who give birth, but, with my wife now, there is no extra time for women who experience a miscarriage. They could go to medical and get a [limited duty paperwork] written, but if they don't do that, they are expected to go right back to work. I believe husbands also should get that time to help their spouse and be around for them when they go through those situations.

—Enlisted Man

Improvement to the family planning process. You shouldn't have to fit it into a timeline. I'm career-oriented, so I asked my husband about freezing my eggs. So, then we did three tours, came back to [installation], and I said I'll get advice from someone that isn't a [occupational specialty] doctor, and they said you have to be 35 or try for a year continuously before you can even talk about freezing your eggs. I told her we're in a long-term relationship and we're dual-military, and we're not going to have bad timing to make biology happen.

—Female Officer

References

- American Psychological Association. (n.d.). Stigma. *The American Psychological Association dictionary of psychology*. <https://dictionary.apa.org/stigma>
- DACOWITS (Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services). (2020). *Quarterly meeting minutes*. U.S. Department of Defense. https://dacowits.defense.gov/Portals/48/Documents/Reports/2020/Minutes/407-DOD-2020-September%202020%20Meeting%20Minutes_11.19.2020.pdf
- DoD (U.S. Department of Defense). (2020). *DoD instruction 1350.02: DoD Military Equal Opportunity Program*. <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/135002p.pdf>
- DoD. (2023, January 4). *DOD expands military parental leave program* [Press release]. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3259259/dod-expands-military-parental-leave-program/>
- Lehrfeld, J. (2023). Marine Corps will move away from tape test when measuring body fat. *Marine Corps Times*. <https://www.marinecorpstimes.com/news/your-marine-corps/2022/09/07/marine-corps-moves-away-from-tape-test-in-measuring-body-fat/>
- U.S. Air Force. (2023). *Body Composition Program policy memo*. https://www.af.mil/Portals/1/documents/2023SAF/Tab_1_Air_Force_Body_Composition_Policy_Memo.pdf
- U.S. Army. (2023). *Army Combat Fitness Test*. <https://www.army.mil/acft/>
- U.S. Navy. (2023). *Navy Physical Readiness Program: Guide 4: Body composition assessment (BCA)*. https://www.mynavyhr.navy.mil/Portals/55/Support/Culture%20Resilience/Physical/Guide_4-Body_Composition_Assessment_BCA_JAN_2023.pdf?ver=V-3wCu5X586wXMTCa4C2ag%3D%3D

Appendix A. Installations Visited for 2023 Focus Groups

Service	Installation	State	Date of Site Visit
Army	Fort Bragg (now Fort Liberty)	North Carolina	April 12–13, 2023
Marine Corps	Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point	North Carolina	April 17–18, 2023
Marine Corps	Camp Lejeune	North Carolina	April 20–21, 2023
Army	Fort Benning (now Fort Moore)	Georgia	April 24–25, 2023
Air Force	Moody Air Force Base	Georgia	April 27–28, 2023
Navy	Naval Station Norfolk	Virginia	May 1–2, 2023
Navy	Naval Air Station Oceana	Virginia	May 4–5, 2023
Air Force	Langley Air Force Base	Virginia	May 11–12, 2023

Appendix B. 2023 Mini-Survey

1. What is your Service branch?

- ☐ Army
- ☐ Navy
- ☐ Marine Corps
- ☐ Air Force
- ☐ Space Force

2. Are you a member of a Reserve or National Guard unit?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

3. What is your age?

- ☐ 17–20 ☐ 35–39
- ☐ 21–24 ☐ 40–44
- ☐ 25–29 ☐ 45–49
- ☐ 30–34 ☐ 50 or older

4. What is your gender?

- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male

5. What is your pay grade?

- ☐ E-1–E-3
- ☐ E-4–E-6
- ☐ E-7–E-9
- ☐ W-01–W-03
- ☐ W-04–W-05
- ☐ O-1–O-3
- ☐ O-4 or higher

6. Is your ethnicity Spanish/Hispanic/Latino?

- ☐ Yes, Mexican, Mexican-American, Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban, or other Spanish/Hispanic/Latino
- ☐ No, not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino

7. What is your race? *Check all that apply.*

- ☐ White
- ☐ Black or African American
- ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native
- ☐ Asian (for example, Asian Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese)
- ☐ Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander (for example, Chamorro, Guamanian, Samoan)

8. What is your marital status?

- ☐ Never married
- ☐ Married to a current Service member (Active Duty, Reserve, or National Guard)
- ☐ Married to a civilian or veteran (not currently serving)
- ☐ Separated
- ☐ Divorced
- ☐ Widowed

9. Do you have any dependent children?

- ☐ Yes, living in my home
- ☐ Yes, not living in my home
- ☐ No

10. How many total years have you served in the military? *Please round to the nearest year.*

_____ year(s)

TURN OVER →

11. How easy or difficult do you feel it is for the members of your Service to have a family and continue to advance their careers in the military?
- ☐ Very easy
- ☐ Somewhat easy
- ☐ Somewhat difficult
- ☐ Very difficult
12. Which of the following best describes your intentions for your military career?
- ☐ Staying until I am eligible for retirement or longer
- ☐ Staying beyond my present obligation but not necessarily until retirement
- ☐ Probably leaving after my current obligation
- ☐ Definitely leaving after my current obligation
- ☐ Leaving the Active Component to join the Reserve or National Guard
- ☐ I am currently eligible for retirement
- ☐ Undecided/not sure
13. If you have stayed or plan to stay beyond your current obligation of military service, which of the following best describes why? *Check all that apply:*
- ☐ I do not plan to stay beyond my obligation
- ☐ Benefits (including medical, education, commissary and exchange stores, and VA home loan)
- ☐ Enjoyment of military lifestyle
- ☐ Family's desire to stay in
- ☐ Lack of civilian job opportunities
- ☐ Mission or purpose
- ☐ Pay and allowances (including military retirement, housing allowance, and tax-free pay)
- ☐ Pride in service
- ☐ Satisfaction with career experience, training, and professional development
- ☐ Other _____
14. Which potential benefit or policy would *most* encourage you to stay in the military beyond your current obligation? *Choose one:*
- ☐ No additional benefits or new policies could encourage me to stay longer
- ☐ Increased base pay or housing allowance
- ☐ Geographic stability (fewer PCS moves)
- ☐ Expanded co-location opportunities for dual-military couples and parents
- ☐ Increased family or caregiver leave
- ☐ Additional reproductive health care benefits (such as access to fertility treatment)
- ☐ Expanded education benefits
- ☐ Increased access to child care
- ☐ More adaptive body composition standards
- ☐ Other _____
15. Have you ever worried you wouldn't meet your Service's height and weight standards (measuring body composition) during your military career?
- ☐ Yes ☐ No
16. Have you ever worried you would fail a physical fitness test event (e.g., run, planks, pushups, or pullups, etc.) during your military career?
- ☐ Yes ☐ No
17. Rate your agreement with the following statement: **Women in my Service who become pregnant are more likely to encounter obstacles toward advancing their career.**
- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

Appendix B.1. 2023 Mini-Survey Findings by Gender

Participant Characteristic	Women (n = 239)		Men (n = 241)		Percentage of All Participants (n = 481)	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Gender						
Female	-	-	-	-	239	49.8
Male	-	-	-	-	241	50.2
Missing	0	-	0	-	1*	-
Total	239	49.8	241	50.2	481	100
Service Branch						
Army	57	23.8	50	20.7	107	22.2
Navy	57	23.8	62	25.7	119	24.9
Marine Corps	65	27.2	67	27.8	132	27.4
Air Force	60	25.1	62	25.7	122	25.4
Missing	0	-	0	-	0	-
Total	239	100.0	241	100.0	481	100.0
National Guard or Reserves						
Yes	1	0.4	0	0.0	1	0.2
No	237	99.6	241	100	478	99.8
Missing	1	-	0	-	1	-
Total	239	100.0	241	100.0	481	100.0
Age						
17–20	8	3.3	13	5.4	21	4.4
21–24	47	19.7	31	12.9	78	16.2
25–29	69	28.9	78	32.4	148	30.8
30–34	54	22.6	43	17.8	97	20.2
35–39	42	17.6	46	19.1	88	18.3
40–44	15	6.3	21	8.7	36	7.5
45–49	2	0.8	6	2.5	8	1.7
50 or older	2	0.8	3	1.2	5	1.0
Missing	0	-	0	-	0	-
Total	239	100.0	241	100.0	481	100.0
Pay Grade						
E1–E3	16	6.7	20	8.3	36	7.7
E4–E6	80	33.5	81	33.8	161	33.5
E7–E9	26	10.9	22	9.2	48	10.0
O1–O3	76	31.8	80	33.3	156	32.5
O4 or higher	30	12.6	20	8.3	50	10.4
W01–W03	7	2.9	12	5.0	19	4.0
W04–W05	4	1.7	5	2.1	9	1.9
Missing	0	-	1	-	1	-
Total	239	100.0	241	100.0	481	100.0

Participant Characteristic	Women (n = 239)		Men (n = 241)		Percentage of All Participants (n = 481)	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Length of Military Service						
Less than 3 years	38	16.0	34	14.2	73	15.2
3–5 years	47	19.7	51	21.3	98	20.5
6–9 years	51	21.4	53	22.1	104	21.7
10–14 years	45	18.9	34	14.2	79	16.5
15–19 years	38	16.0	43	17.9	81	16.9
20 years or more	19	8.0	25	10.4	44	9.2
Missing	1	-	1	-	2	-
Total	239	100.0	241	100.0	481	100.0
Race						
Asian	13	5.7	8	3.4	21	4.6
Black	47	20.6	47	20.3	94	20.4
American Indian or Alaska Native	2	0.9	1	0.4	3	0.7
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1	0.4	1	0.4	2	0.4
White	150	65.8	164	70.7	315	68.3
Multiple races	15	6.6	11	4.7	26	5.6
Missing	11	-	9	-	20	-
Total	239	100.0	241	100.0	481	100.0
Spanish/Hispanic/Latino Ethnicity (Mexican, Mexican-American, Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban, or other Spanish/Hispanic/Latino)						
Yes	50	21.6	34	14.3	84	17.9
No	181	78.4	203	85.7	385	82.1
Missing	8	-	4	-	12	-
Total	239	100.0	241	100.0	481	100.0
Relationship Status						
Divorced	27	11.3	18	7.5	45	9.4
Married to a civilian or veteran	34	14.2	126	52.3	161	33.5
Married to a current Service member	96	40.2	13	5.4	109	22.7
Never married	74	31.0	81	33.6	155	32.2
Separated	8	3.3	3	1.2	11	2.3
Missing	0	-	0	-	0	-
Total	239	100.0	241	100.0	481	100.0
Dependent Children						
Yes, at home	116	48.5	103	42.7	219	45.5
Yes, not at home	2	0.8	10	4.1	12	2.5
No	121	50.6	128	53.1	250	52.0
Missing	0	-	0	-	0	-
Total	239	100.0	241	100.0	481	100.0

Participant Characteristic	Women (n = 239)		Men (n = 241)		Percentage of All Participants (n = 481)	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Family Balance						
Very easy	5	2.1	21	8.7	26	5.4
Somewhat easy	46	19.2	68	28.2	114	23.7
Somewhat difficult	141	59.0	129	53.5	271	56.3
Very difficult	47	19.7	23	9.5	70	14.6
Missing	0	-	0	-	0	-
Total	239	100.0	241	100.0	481	100.0
Career Intentions						
Staying beyond obligation	36	15.1	33	13.8	69	14.4
Staying to retirement	104	43.5	115	47.9	219	45.6
Eligible for retirement	13	5.4	14	5.8	27	5.6
Leaving active component	9	3.8	5	2.1	14	2.9
Probably leaving	32	13.4	26	10.8	58	12.1
Definitely leaving	23	9.6	16	6.7	39	8.1
Undecided	22	9.2	31	12.9	54	11.3
Missing	0	-	1	-	1	-
Total	239	100.0	241	100.0	481	100.0
Reasons for Staying*						
Do not plan to stay	50	21.5	41	17.8	91	19.6
Benefits (medical, education, commissary and exchange stores, VA home loan)	135	57.9	139	60.4	275	59.3
Enjoyment of military lifestyle	49	21.0	79	34.3	128	27.6
Family's desire to stay in	19	8.2	24	10.4	43	9.3
Lack of civilian jobs	12	5.2	14	6.1	26	5.6
Mission or purpose	61	26.2	96	41.9	158	34.1
Pay and allowances	118	50.6	127	55.5	246	53.1
Pride in service	89	38.2	98	42.8	187	40.4

Participant Characteristic	Women (n = 239)		Men (n = 241)		Percentage of All Participants (n = 481)	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Satisfaction with career experience, training, and professional development	93	39.9	100	43.5	194	41.8
Other	24	10.3	15	6.5	39	8.4
Potential Benefits to Encourage Staying in Military						
No additional benefits or policies would encourage staying longer	31	13.0	26	10.8	57	11.9
Increased base pay or housing allowance	42	17.6	86	35.7	128	26.7
Geographic stability	23	9.7	31	12.9	54	11.3
Expanded co-location opportunities	13	5.5	5	2.1	18	3.8
Increased family or caregiver leave	5	2.1	5	2.1	10	2.1
Additional reproductive health care benefits	7	2.9	1	0.4	8	1.7
Expanded education benefits	7	2.9	4	1.7	11	2.3
Increased access to child care	14	5.9	3	1.2	17	3.5
More adaptive body composition standards	9	3.8	5	2.1	15	3.1
Other	4	1.7	12	5.0	16	3.3
Selected Multiple	83	34.9	63	26.1	146	30.4
Missing	1	-	0	-	1	-
Total	239	100.0	241	100.0	481	100.0
Worried About Body Composition Standards						
Yes	124	51.9	57	23.7	182	37.8
No	115	48.1	184	76.3	299	62.2
Missing	0	-	0	-	0	-
Total	239	100.0	241	100.0	481	100.0

Participant Characteristic	Women (n = 239)		Men (n = 241)		Percentage of All Participants (n = 481)	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Worried About Failing Fitness Test						
Yes	110	46.0	53	22.0	164	34.1
No	129	54.0	188	78.0	317	65.9
Missing	0	-	0	-	0	-
Total	239	100.0	241	100.0	481	100.0
“Women in My Service Who Become Pregnant Are More Likely to Encounter Obstacles Toward Career Advancement”						
Strongly agree	97	40.9	32	13.4	129	27.0
Agree	90	38.0	81	33.9	171	35.8
Neither agree nor disagree	35	14.8	86	36.0	122	25.6
Disagree	8	3.4	30	12.6	38	8.0
Strongly disagree	7	3.0	10	4.2	17	3.6
Missing	2	-	2	-	4	-
Total	239	100.0	241	100.0	481	100.0

Note: Some percentages do not sum to 100 because of rounding or because participants were asked to select all responses that applied to a question.

One participant did not select a gender. This participant is included in the “all participants” column.

Source: DACOWITS mini-survey (data from all the groups)

Appendix C. 2023 Focus Group Protocols

Appendix C contains three focus group protocols delivered in 2023: Recruitment and Retention, Physical Fitness and Body Composition Assessments, and Pregnancy and Gender Discrimination.

C.1. Focus Group Protocol: Recruitment and Retention

Session Information

Location:

Date:

Time:

Facilitator:

Recorder:

Number of participants present:

Focus Group Kickoff: Key Points to Cover

1. Welcome attendees.
 - ▶ I am **[INSERT FIRST NAME]**, and I am a member of the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services, known as DACOWITS, and this is **[INTRODUCE PARTNER'S FIRST NAME]**, also a member of DACOWITS.
 - ▶ We have **[INSERT FIRST NAME(S)]** here with us from the DACOWITS staff.
 - ▶ Our research contractor, **[INSERT FIRST NAME]**, is with a research organization hired to transcribe these sessions, and they are part of the DACOWITS research team.
2. Introduce DACOWITS and its purpose.
 - ▶ Again, DACOWITS stands for the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services. DACOWITS was established in 1951 and is one of the oldest Department of Defense Federal Advisory Committees. The Committee is composed of women and men, some of whom have prior military service. We have been appointed by the Secretary of Defense to provide advice and recommendations on matters and policies related to the recruitment, retention, employment, integration, well-being, and treatment of servicewomen in the Armed Forces.
 - ▶ Every year, DACOWITS studies specific topics and prepares a report for the Secretary of Defense. Since 1951, the Committee has submitted more than 1,000 recommendations to the Secretary of Defense for consideration. As of 2022, approximately 97 percent have been either fully or partially adopted by the Department.

- ▶ Each year, DACOWITS visits several military installations and talks to hundreds of Service members like you about their experiences in the military. Today, we will talk about joining the military, your recruitment process, marketing and advertising, and retention. We are meeting with groups of women and men, both officer and enlisted personnel. We would like to spend this time discussing these topics, but we will also set aside time at the end to discuss any other topics that you'd like to talk about related to women serving in the military.
3. Describe how the focus group session will work.
- ▶ A focus group is a guided, carefully planned discussion. As facilitators, we have a set of scripted questions that we'd like to cover today, but we encourage open conversation.
 - ▶ The session will last approximately 90 minutes, and we will not take a formal break. Restrooms are located **[INSERT RESTROOM LOCATION]**. Please don't hesitate to step out at any time for whatever reason.
 - ▶ Your opinions and attitudes are important to us. Although we would like to hear from everyone, feel free to answer as many or as few questions as you prefer.
 - ▶ Our job today is to listen and collect information about your experiences and perceptions. Our job is not to provide information. That means we will not correct any inaccuracies or misperceptions that may be shared by an individual or the group, so you should not assume everything you hear today from other participants is accurate.
4. Explain the ground rules.
- ▶ Please speak clearly and one at a time to make sure our research contractor can capture the discussion. Please do not engage in side bar conversations during the focus group.
 - ▶ Try to avoid the use of acronyms. If we notice that you are using acronyms, we may ask you to stop and explain the acronym.
 - ▶ We want to hear your opinions. There may be times in the discussion when you feel differently from other people, and we want to hear about that. Even though you may feel differently than people in this room, you represent others who aren't here today who may have similar feelings. Please be respectful of others' opinions that are shared today.
 - ▶ We have a lot of questions to cover, so we may need to interrupt you to keep the conversation moving. Please don't take it personally; it's simply to ensure we cover all our questions today.
 - ▶ Our team will make sure we're sticking to the schedule and will alert us if we need to move on to the next question.
5. Emphasize that participation is voluntary and that privacy and confidentiality will be maintained.
- ▶ Your participation in this session is completely voluntary. If you would prefer to excuse yourself from the focus group at any time, you are free to do so.
 - ▶ We treat the information you share as confidential. We do not record your names and no information will be reported in our findings that can identify you. All members of the DACOWITS team have signed agreements pledging to safeguard the confidentiality of the information we gather during these sessions.
 - ▶ Our notes and what we discuss today will not be shared with anyone in your chain of command or at this installation.

- ▶ It is important that each of you agree to respect and protect each other's privacy. We expect you to keep any information you hear today in the strictest of confidence. We also expect you not to share the identities of other participants with anyone outside this group.
- ▶ We are required to report some behaviors. If we learn that you are being hurt or plan on hurting yourself or others, or others are being hurt or plan on hurting themselves or others, the law requires that we share this information with someone who can help and with the appropriate authority.
- ▶ If you have questions following the focus group, we encourage you to speak with your installation's Equal Opportunity Advisor, your Command Managed Equal Opportunity Coordinator, or command representatives.
- ▶ In front of you are a few short forms.
 - The first is a participant rights form for you to read. You do not need to sign this form. If you stay for the group discussion, your participation will indicate your consent. If you do not agree to the terms in the form, you will not be able to participate in the group today.
 - The second is a short mini-survey for you to complete anonymously. Please do not write your name on the form. This mini-survey enables us to compile demographic data on the participants we speak with during our site visits. Because the mini-survey is anonymous, we will not be able to link any responses you make during the discussion today with your responses to the mini-survey. Please be sure to fill out the front and the back of the form.
- ▶ Once we have completed the focus groups for this year's selected installations, our team will compile the results into a report that we will use to write our annual report to the Secretary of Defense **[SHOW COPY OF 2020 REPORT]**. Copies of our annual reports are available online at dacowits.defense.gov. At the conclusion of our focus group, you will receive a DACOWITS brochure containing information about the Committee.

Question Number	Topic	Notes
Warmup/Introductions		
Before we get started with our discussion about why you joined the military, let's do some introductions.		
1	<p>(MODERATOR: Ensure each person answers all three questions before moving on to next person.)</p> <p>Let's go around the room and have each of you tell us—</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How many years you've served in the military ▪ Your job in the military ▪ How long you've been with your current unit 	
Joining the Military		
Let's begin by talking about your experiences before joining the military. We are interested in learning about the factors that encourage and discourage people from joining the military and whether these factors are similar or different for women and men.		
2	To begin, when did you first start to consider joining the military?	
3	<p>Thinking back to when you were considering joining, how did you learn what life might be like in the military?</p> <p>[PROBE IF NEEDED:] Commercials? Movies? Parent or family serving? Social media? Talking with recruiters?</p>	
4	By show of hands, how many of you would you recommend military service for a young woman today? [NOTE TAKERS: COUNT THE NUMBER OF HANDS OUT LOUD.]	
5	What were some of the major factors that encouraged you to choose military service over other employment or educational opportunities?	
6	<p>Now I want you to think about factors that might encourage someone else to join the military.</p> <p>Do you think the factors that encourage women and men to join the military today are similar or different? How so?</p>	
7	What factors, if any, might discourage someone from joining the military?	
8	Are the factors that discourage women and men from joining the military similar or different? How so?	
9	Was there anyone in your life who encouraged or discouraged you from joining the military? If so, who?	
10	What could your Service do to make young women more inclined to join the military?	

Question Number	Topic	Notes
Recruiters and the Recruitment Process		
<p>Now let's talk about your experience with recruiters and the recruitment process. We are most interested in your experiences with your main recruiter or the person who was your primary point of contact during the period when you joined your Service. We're interested in hearing how frequently you engaged with your recruiter and what you liked and disliked about your experience in the recruitment process.</p> <p>[FOR OFFICER GROUPS:] We understand that as officers, you may not have gone through a traditional recruitment process. For example, you may have commissioned through the Military Service Academies, ROTC, or be prior enlisted. Today, we're most interested in hearing about your experiences with the primary point of contact you interacted with prior to becoming an officer in your Service.</p>		
11	By a show of hands, how many of you had a female recruiter as your main recruiter? [NOTE TAKERS: COUNT THE NUMBER OF HANDS OUT LOUD.]	
12	How did you engage or communicate with your recruiter during the recruitment process? [PROBE IF NEEDED:] In person? Online? Over the phone? Text message? At events?	
13	What, if anything, did you like about your experience being recruited into the military?	
14	What, if anything, did you dislike about your experience being recruited into the military?	
15	What barriers, if any, may hinder women during the recruitment process?	
16	What recommendations, if any, would you make to your Service to improve the recruitment of women?	
Marketing and Advertisement		
<p>Next let's talk about your Service's current or recent advertising campaigns. We are interested in hearing your perspectives on how recent advertising campaigns compare with the advertising campaigns you saw before joining the military and whether recent campaigns align with the mission and values of your Service.</p>		
17	By a show of hands, how many of you have recently seen recruitment commercials or advertisements for your Service? [NOTE TAKERS: COUNT THE NUMBER OF HANDS OUT LOUD.] For those who raised your hand, where did you see the commercials or advertisements—for example, TV, video games, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, other forms of media, or magazines?	
18	How do your Service's recent recruitment commercials or advertisements compare with those you saw when you were deciding to join the military?	
19	How do you think recent commercials and advertisements portray the mission and values of your Service?	

Question Number	Topic	Notes
20	Do you feel that your Service's recent recruitment commercials or advertisements appeal to both women and men considering military service? If so, how? If not, why?	
Retention		
Now let's shift to talk about the reasons Service members decide to stay in or leave the military. We are interested in what influences someone's decision to stay in or leave the military and whether these factors are similar or different for male and female Service members.		
21	Thinking back to when you were joining the military, by a show of hands, how many of you planned to stay in beyond your <i>initial</i> service obligation? [NOTE TAKERS: COUNT THE NUMBER OF HANDS OUT LOUD.]	
22	Now by another show of hands, how many of you plan to stay in the military beyond your <i>current</i> service obligation? [NOTE TAKERS: COUNT THE NUMBER OF HANDS OUT LOUD.]	
23	What factors might encourage you or someone like you to stay in the military beyond their current service obligation?	
	[PROBE IF NEEDED:] For example, geographic stability, expanded access to child care, professional development opportunities, pay, family leave policies, reproductive healthcare, or educational benefits.	
24	Do you think the factors that encourage women and men to stay in the military are similar or different? How so?	
25	What factors might influence you or someone like you to leave the military after their service obligations?	
	[PROBE IF NEEDED:] For example, lack of geographic stability, access to child care, professional development opportunities, pay, family leave policies, reproductive health benefits, and educational benefits.	
26	Do you think the factors that discourage women and men from staying in the military are similar or different? How so?	
27	What is the number one thing your Service could do, if anything, to retain you or someone like you?	
28	What recommendations would you make to your Service, if any, to improve the retention of servicewomen?	

Question Number	Topic	Notes
General Questions		
We're also interested in hearing about other issues we haven't yet discussed that may affect women in the military. Please note, we may use your ideas as future topics of DACOWITS research.		
29	What do you feel is the biggest challenge to women serving in the military today?	
30	If you could send one recommendation back to the Secretary of Defense, what would it be?	
31	Is there anything else you'd like to share or discuss related to servicewomen that we haven't talked about today?	
(MODERATOR: Reinforce confidentiality) This concludes our discussion. Thank you for taking the time to share your knowledge with us. Your thoughts are valuable to our efforts to inform the Secretary of Defense on these matters. We will keep your information confidential—please do so as well by not sharing what you heard with anyone else. As a reminder, you should not assume everything you heard today from other participants or the group is accurate, and we ask you to defer to your Service's current regulations and policies for the most accurate and up-to-date information. Once again, thank you very much for participating.		

C.2. Focus Group Protocol: Physical Fitness and Body Composition Assessments

Session Information

Location:

Date:

Time:

Facilitator:

Recorder:

Number of participants present:

Focus Group Kickoff: Key Points to Cover

1. Welcome attendees

- ▶ I am **[INSERT FIRST NAME]**, and I am a member of the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services, known as DACOWITS, and this is **[INTRODUCE PARTNER'S FIRST NAME]**, also a member of DACOWITS.
- ▶ We have **[INSERT FIRST NAME(S)]** here with us from the DACOWITS staff.
- ▶ Our research contractor, **[INSERT FIRST NAME]**, is with a research organization hired to transcribe these sessions, and they are part of the DACOWITS research team.

2. Introduce DACOWITS and its purpose.

- ▶ Again, DACOWITS stands for the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services. DACOWITS was established in 1951 and is one of the oldest Department of Defense Federal Advisory Committees. The Committee is composed of women and men, some of whom have prior military service. We have been appointed by the Secretary of Defense to provide advice and recommendations on matters and policies related to the recruitment, retention, employment, integration, well-being, and treatment of servicewomen in the Armed Forces.
- ▶ Every year, DACOWITS studies specific topics and prepares a report for the Secretary of Defense. Since 1951, the Committee has submitted more than 1,000 recommendations to the Secretary of Defense for consideration. As of 2022, approximately 97 percent have been either fully or partially adopted by the Department.
- ▶ Each year, DACOWITS visits several military installations and talks to hundreds of Service members like you about their experiences in the military. Today, we will talk about your Service's physical fitness and body composition assessments. We are meeting with groups of women and men, both officer and enlisted personnel. We would like to spend this time discussing these topics, but we will also set aside time at the end to discuss any other topics that you'd like to talk about related to women serving in the military.

3. Describe how the focus group session will work.
 - ▶ A focus group is a guided, carefully planned discussion. As facilitators, we have a set of scripted questions that we'd like to cover today, but we encourage open conversation.
 - ▶ The session will last approximately 90 minutes, and we will not take a formal break. Restrooms are located **[INSERT RESTROOM LOCATION]**. Please don't hesitate to step out at any time for whatever reason.
 - ▶ Your opinions and attitudes are important to us. Although we would like to hear from everyone, feel free to answer as many or as few questions as you prefer.
 - ▶ Our job today is to listen and collect information about your experiences and perceptions. Our job is not to provide information. That means we will not correct any inaccuracies or misperceptions that may be shared by an individual or the group, so you should not assume everything you hear today from other participants is accurate.
4. Explain the ground rules.
 - ▶ Please speak clearly and one at a time to make sure our research contractor can capture the discussion. Please do not engage in side bar conversations during the focus group.
 - ▶ Try to avoid the use of acronyms. If we notice that you are using acronyms, we may ask you to stop and explain the acronym.
 - ▶ We want to hear your opinions. There may be times in the discussion when you feel differently from other people, and we want to hear about that. Even though you may feel differently than people in this room, you represent others who aren't here today who may have similar feelings. Please be respectful of others' opinions that are shared today.
 - ▶ We have a lot of questions to cover, so we may need to interrupt you to keep the conversation moving. Please don't take it personally; it's simply to ensure we cover all our questions today.
 - ▶ Our team will make sure we're sticking to the schedule and will alert us if we need to move on to the next question.
5. Emphasize that participation is voluntary and that privacy and confidentiality will be maintained
 - ▶ Your participation in this session is completely voluntary. If you would prefer to excuse yourself from the focus group at any time, you are free to do so.
 - ▶ We treat the information you share as confidential. We do not record your names, and no information will be reported in our findings that can identify you. All members of the DACOWITS team have signed agreements pledging to safeguard the confidentiality of the information we gather during these sessions.
 - ▶ Our notes and what we discuss today will not be shared with anyone in your chain of command or at this installation.
 - ▶ It is important that each of you agree to respect and protect each other's privacy. We expect you to keep any information you hear today in the strictest of confidence. We also expect you not to share the identities of other participants with anyone outside this group.

- ▶ We are required to report some behaviors. If we learn that you are being hurt or plan on hurting yourself or others, or others are being hurt or plan on hurting themselves or others, the law requires that we share this information with someone who can help and with the appropriate authority.
- ▶ If you have questions following the focus group, we encourage you to speak with your installation's Equal Opportunity Advisor or your Command Managed Equal Opportunity Coordinator, or command representatives.
- ▶ In front of you are a few short forms.
 - The first is a participant rights form for you to read. You do not need to sign this form. If you stay for the group discussion, your participation will indicate your consent. If you do not agree to the terms in the form, you will not be able to participate in the group today.
 - The second is a short mini-survey for you to complete anonymously. Please do not write your name on the form. This mini-survey enables us to compile demographic data on the participants we speak with during our site visits. Because the mini-survey is anonymous, we will not be able to link any responses you make during the discussion today with your responses to the mini-survey. Please be sure to fill out the front and the back of the form.
- ▶ Once we have completed the focus groups for this year's selected installations, our team will compile the results into a report that we will use to write our annual report to the Secretary of Defense **[SHOW COPY OF 2020 REPORT]**. Copies of our annual reports are available online at dacowits.defense.gov. At the conclusion of our focus group, you will receive a DACOWITS brochure containing information about the Committee.

Question Number	Topic	Notes
Warmup/Introductions		
Before we get started with our discussion about physical fitness standards, let's do some introductions.		
1	<p>(MODERATOR: Ensure each person answers all three questions before moving on to next person.)</p> <p>Let's go around the room and have each of you tell us—</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How many years you've served in the military Your job in the military How long you've been with your current unit 	
Experience With Physical Fitness Assessments		
<p>Today we want to learn about your experiences with your Service's physical fitness assessment. The Department of Defense directs the Services to design a physical fitness assessment that measures a Service member's basic fitness level. Occupational assessments assess a Service member's ability to complete job-related tasks and may not be required for all jobs. For the rest of this discussion, we will focus solely on your Service's <i>physical fitness assessment</i>.</p> <p>Let's begin by talking about the requirements and frequency of these assessments.</p>		
2	How often does your Service require a physical fitness assessment?	
3	What are the current components of your Service's physical fitness assessment?	
4	In your opinion, does your Service's physical fitness assessment properly measure your fitness level? Why or why not?	
5	What happens when someone fails a physical fitness assessment?	
6	Are particular components of your Service's physical fitness assessment more challenging for women or men?	
7	How, if at all, does your performance on the physical fitness assessment affect your career progression—for example, promotion criteria, evaluation criteria, school assignments, or results that are recorded in your personal record?	
8	Does your Service's physical fitness assessment affect women's and men's career progression differently?	
9	Does someone's performance on their physical fitness assessment affect the way leaders or others in their unit perceive them, either positively or negatively?	
10	What recommendations, if any, would you make to your Service about its physical fitness standards or the way in which physical fitness is measured?	

Question Number	Topic	Notes
Preparing for the Physical Fitness Assessment		
Now we want to talk about how you prepare for the physical fitness assessment. Preparation could include training, nutrition, and other ways you get yourself ready for a physical fitness assessment.		
11	When do you start thinking about your next physical fitness assessment? How far in advance?	
12	How do you prepare for your Service's physical fitness assessment? [PROBE IF NEEDED:] Is your preparation consistent throughout the year, or do you prepare shortly before the assessment? Do you vary your training or eating habits to prepare?	
13	As far as you know, do women and men in your Service prepare for the physical fitness assessment similarly? If not, please describe any differences in preparation.	
14	What resources are available to help you prepare for the physical fitness assessment? [PROBE IF NEEDED:] Physical fitness program? Installation gym? Trainers? Nutritionists?	
15	Are there any additional resources you wish your Service provided you related to the physical fitness assessment or general health and nutrition?	
Body Composition Standards and Assessment		
Next we want to discuss your Service's body composition standards. When we say body composition, we are referring to your Service's height and weight standards used to measure body composition, such as body mass index, or BMI, sometimes referred to as body fat.		
16	How does your Service currently measure body composition and how frequently are you measured?	
17	Is your body composition measured publicly in front of leaders or others in your unit or privately in a one-on-one setting?	
18	What happens when someone fails their body composition assessment?	
19	In your opinion, are the current body composition standards and forms of measurement useful? Why or why not?	
20	How, if at all, do you prepare for your Service's body composition assessment? [PROBE IF NEEDED:] Is your preparation consistent throughout the year, or do you prepare shortly before the assessment? Do you vary your training or eating habits to prepare?	
21	As far as you know, do women and men in your Service prepare for the body composition assessment similarly? If not, please describe any differences in preparation.	
22	In your opinion, are your Service's body composition standards more difficult to pass for women or men?	

Question Number	Topic	Notes
23	How, if at all, does the body composition assessment affect your career progression—for example, promotion criteria, evaluation criteria, school assignments, or results that are recorded in your personal record?	
24	Does your Service's body composition assessment affect women's and men's career progression differently?	
25	What resources and support are available to help you meet your Service's body composition standards?	
26	What recommendations, if any, would you make to your Service about its body composition standards or the way in which body composition is measured?	

General Questions

We're also interested in hearing about other issues we haven't yet discussed that may affect women in the military. Please note, we may use your ideas as future topics of DACOWITS research.

27	What do you feel is the biggest challenge to women serving in the military today?	
28	If you could send one recommendation back to the Secretary of Defense, what would it be?	
29	Is there anything else you'd like to share or discuss related to servicewomen that we haven't talked about today?	

(MODERATOR: Reinforce confidentiality) This concludes our discussion. Thank you for taking the time to share your knowledge with us. Your thoughts are valuable to our efforts to inform the Secretary of Defense on these matters. We will keep your information confidential—please do so as well by not sharing what you heard with anyone else. As a reminder, you should not assume everything you heard today from other participants or the group is accurate, and we ask you to defer to your Services' current regulations and policies for the most accurate and up-to-date information. Once again, thank you very much for participating.

C.3. Focus Group Protocol: Pregnancy and Gender Discrimination

Session Information

Location:

Date:

Time:

Facilitator:

Recorder:

Number of participants present:

Focus Group Kickoff: Key Points to Cover

1. Welcome attendees.

- ▶ I am **[INSERT FIRST NAME]**, and I am a member of the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services, known as DACOWITS, and this is **[INTRODUCE PARTNER'S FIRST NAME]**, also a member of DACOWITS.
- ▶ We have **[INSERT FIRST NAME(S)]** here with us from the DACOWITS staff.
- ▶ Our research contractor, **[INSERT FIRST NAME]**, is with a research organization hired to transcribe these sessions, and they are part of the DACOWITS research team.

2. Introduce DACOWITS and its purpose.

- ▶ Again, DACOWITS stands for the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services. DACOWITS was established in 1951 and is one of the oldest Department of Defense Federal Advisory Committees. The Committee is composed of women and men, some of whom have prior military service. We have been appointed by the Secretary of Defense to provide advice and recommendations on matters and policies related to the recruitment, retention, employment, integration, well-being, and treatment of servicewomen in the Armed Forces.
- ▶ Every year, DACOWITS studies specific topics and prepares a report for the Secretary of Defense. Since 1951, the Committee has submitted more than 1,000 recommendations to the Secretary of Defense for consideration. As of 2022, approximately 97 percent have been either fully or partially adopted by the Department.
- ▶ Each year, DACOWITS visits several military installations and talks to hundreds of Service members like you about their experiences in the military. Today, we will talk about pregnancy in the military and gender discrimination. We are meeting with groups of women and men, both officer and enlisted personnel. We would like to spend this time discussing these topics, but we will also set aside time at the end to discuss any other topics that you'd like to talk about related to women serving in the military.

3. Describe how the focus group session will work.
 - ▶ A focus group is a guided, carefully planned discussion. As facilitators, we have a set of scripted questions that we'd like to cover today, but we encourage open conversation.
 - ▶ The session will last approximately 90 minutes, and we will not take a formal break. Restrooms are located **[INSERT RESTROOM LOCATION]**. Please don't hesitate to step out at any time for whatever reason.
 - ▶ Your opinions and attitudes are important to us. Although we would like to hear from everyone, feel free to answer as many or as few questions as you prefer.
 - ▶ Our job today is to listen and collect information about your experiences and perceptions. Our job is not to provide information. That means we will not correct any inaccuracies or misperceptions that may be shared by an individual or the group, so you should not assume everything you hear today from other participants is accurate.
4. Explain the ground rules.
 - ▶ Please speak clearly and one at a time to make sure our research contractor can capture the discussion. Please do not engage in side bar conversations during the focus group.
 - ▶ Try to avoid the use of acronyms. If we notice that you are using acronyms, we may ask you to stop and explain the acronym.
 - ▶ We want to hear your opinions. There may be times in the discussion when you feel differently from other people and we want to hear about that. Even though you may feel differently than people in this room, you represent others who aren't here today who may have similar feelings. Please be respectful of others' opinions that are shared today.
 - ▶ We have a lot of questions to cover, so we may need to interrupt you to keep the conversation moving. Please don't take it personally; it's simply to ensure we cover all our questions today.
 - ▶ Our team will make sure we're sticking to the schedule and will alert us if we need to move on to the next question.
5. Emphasize that participation is voluntary and that privacy and confidentiality will be maintained.
 - ▶ Your participation in this session is completely voluntary. If you would prefer to excuse yourself from the focus group at any time, you are free to do so.
 - ▶ We treat the information you share as confidential. We do not record your names, and no information will be reported in our findings that can identify you. All members of the DACOWITS team have signed agreements pledging to safeguard the confidentiality of the information we gather during these sessions.
 - ▶ Our notes and what we discuss today will not be shared with anyone in your chain of command or at this installation.
 - ▶ It is important that each of you agree to respect and protect each other's privacy. We expect you to keep any information you hear today in the strictest of confidence. We also expect you not to share the identities of other participants with anyone outside this group.

- ▶ We are required to report some behaviors. If we learn that you are being hurt or plan on hurting yourself or others, or others are being hurt or plan on hurting themselves or others, the law requires that we share this information with someone who can help and with the appropriate authority.
- ▶ If you have questions following the focus group, we encourage you to speak with your installation's Equal Opportunity Advisor or your Command Managed Equal Opportunity Coordinator, or command representatives.
- ▶ In front of you are a few short forms.
 - The first is a participant rights form for you to read. You do not need to sign this form. If you stay for the group discussion, your participation will indicate your consent. If you do not agree to the terms in the form, you will not be able to participate in the group today.
 - The second is a short mini-survey for you to complete anonymously. Please do not write your name on the form. This mini-survey enables us to compile demographic data on the participants we speak with during our site visits. Because the mini-survey is anonymous, we will not be able to link any responses you make during the discussion today with your responses to the mini-survey. Please be sure to fill out the front and the back of the form.
- ▶ Once we have completed the focus groups for this year's selected installations, our team will compile the results into a report that we will use to write our annual report to the Secretary of Defense **[SHOW COPY OF 2020 REPORT]**. Copies of our annual reports are available online at dacowits.defense.gov. At the conclusion of our focus group, you will receive a DACOWITS brochure containing information about the Committee.

Question Number	Topic	Notes
Warmup/Introductions		
Before we get started with our discussion about reproductive health, pregnancy, and gender discrimination, let's do some introductions.		
1	<p>(MODERATOR: Ensure each person answers all three questions before moving on to next person.)</p> <p>Let's go around the room and have each of you tell us—</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How many years you've served in the military Your job in the military How long you've been with your current unit 	
Pregnancy in the Military		
Let's begin by talking about pregnancy. The Committee is interested in learning more about pregnancy and postpartum experiences for women in the military, especially issues related to career progression.		
[FOR FEMALE GROUPS:] We realize that you may not have personal experience with this topic, but we want to hear from many different perspectives.		
[FOR MALE GROUPS:] We realize you do not have personal experience with being pregnant, but we want to hear from many different perspectives. Ultimately, these issues are relevant to both female and male Service members.		
2	<p>[FOR FEMALE GROUPS:] By a show of hands, how many of you have been pregnant during your military service or have known someone who has become pregnant during their military service? [NOTE TAKERS: COUNT THE NUMBER OF HANDS ALOUD.]</p> <p>[FOR MALE GROUPS:] By a show of hands, how many of you know someone who has become pregnant during their military service? [NOTE TAKERS: COUNT THE NUMBER OF HANDS ALOUD.]</p>	
3	<p>In your opinion, what are the biggest challenges faced by pregnant servicewomen?</p> <p>[PROBE IF NEEDED:] For example, obtaining maternity uniforms, reassignment, discrimination, stigma of pregnancy, physical fitness requirements, maintaining qualifications, or caregiver leave?</p>	
4	<p>Are pregnant servicewomen treated differently from other servicewomen who are not pregnant? If so, please describe.</p> <p>[IF YES:] Are pregnant servicewomen treated differently even if their ability to perform their normal job duties is not affected by their pregnancy?</p>	

Question Number	Topic	Notes
5	Thinking back to a time when a servicewoman in your unit became pregnant, how did that affect your unit?	
	[If no one has experience in a unit in which a woman was pregnant:] How might a servicewoman becoming pregnant affect the unit, if at all?	
6	How, if at all, does pregnancy affect a servicewoman's career?	
	[PROBE IF NEEDED:] How does pregnancy affect the retention and career progression of servicewomen?	
7	For someone in your career field, are there points in time when becoming pregnant is more advantageous or detrimental to a service member's career?	
	[PROBE IF NEEDED:] For example, is it more impactful (positively or negatively) to become pregnant during a certain time in training or at a particular rank?	
8	Next, we want to talk about how, if at all, Service regulations, policies, or practices impact servicewomen's careers if they become pregnant.	
	Are you aware of any regulations, policies, or practices that may support a servicewomen's career progression if she becomes pregnant?	
9	How, if at all, could your Service better support servicewomen who become pregnant?	
10	In 2023, the Department of Defense expanded its parental leave policy. What do you think about this change and your Service's implementation of the policy?	
11	The Department of Defense recently changed its definition of prohibited discrimination to include pregnancy.	
	By a show of hands, how many of you were aware of this policy change? [NOTE TAKERS: COUNT THE NUMBER OF HANDS ALOUD.]	

Gender Discrimination

Next let's talk about gender discrimination. We're interested in understanding your perspectives on gender discrimination and its impact on unit cohesion, the workplace environment, and retention of military personnel in your Service. For the purposes of today's discussion, gender discrimination is defined as acting in a way that is biased toward a particular gender. Both women and men can experience gender discrimination. Discriminatory behavior can include overt behaviors, such as excluding someone from a leadership position or important meeting because of their gender, or covert behaviors like acting on stereotypes by only asking women to plan social activities or men to do a task requiring physical labor.

12	Considering the definition we just mentioned, do you consider gender discrimination to be an issue within your Service? Why or why not?	
----	---	--

Question Number	Topic	Notes
13	Are there behaviors you have observed during your time in the military that you would consider to be gender discrimination? If so, please describe.	
	[IF NO, or if the group is hesitant:] Can you think of any behaviors that would be discriminatory?	
14	How can gender discrimination or discriminatory behaviors impact the climate of a unit?	
	[PROBE IF NEEDED:] What impact does gender discrimination have on individuals experiencing discrimination? What impact does gender discrimination have on other members of the unit? Does it impact unit cohesion, readiness, or performance?	
15	In your opinion, is gender discrimination more or less likely to occur in certain occupational specialties? If so, please describe.	
16	How, if at all, does gender discrimination affect the career progression of women in your Service?	
17	How comfortable do you feel bringing up, or discussing issues of gender discrimination with leadership?	
18	How confident are you that issues of gender discrimination will be addressed by leaders?	
19	What recommendations do you have, if any, for ways your Service can prevent or address gender discrimination?	

General Questions

We're also interested in hearing about other issues we haven't yet discussed that may affect women in the military. Please note, we may use your ideas as future topics of DACOWITS research.

20	What do you feel is the biggest challenge to women serving in the military today?	
21	If you could send one recommendation back to the Secretary of Defense, what would it be?	
22	Is there anything else you'd like to share or discuss related to servicewomen that we haven't talked about today?	

(MODERATOR: Reinforce confidentiality) This concludes our discussion. Thank you for taking the time to share your knowledge with us. Your thoughts are valuable to our efforts to inform the Secretary of Defense on these matters. We will keep your information confidential—please do so as well by not sharing what you heard with anyone else. As a reminder, you should not assume everything you heard today from other participants or the group is accurate, and we ask you to defer to your Services' current regulations and policies for the most accurate and up-to-date information. Once again, thank you very much for participating.