With President Truman’s 1948 executive order requiring “equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin,” the military became a leader in the pursuit of equal opportunity for minorities, especially for African Americans.¹ Neither Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 nor the equal employment opportunity or affirmative action regulations of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission apply to active-duty military officers. Instead, officers are covered by a Department of Defense (DoD) equal opportunity program based on a Human Goals Charter first issued by the Secretary of Defense in 1969. This charter establishes DoD’s goal to “provide everyone in the military the opportunity to rise to as high a level of responsibility as possible, based only on individual talent and diligence.”²

This goal of equal opportunity now applies to women as well as minorities except as the service of women is constrained by law and policy. The law has changed over time; currently, there are no longer statutory restrictions. By policy women are restricted from serving in occupations or units whose mission is to engage in direct ground combat. Congressional consultation would be required to lift this policy.

¹Throughout this report, we use the terms African American and black interchangeably.
²This information is taken from U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO), November 1995.
In a 1994 memorandum, Secretary of Defense William Perry reaffirmed DoD’s commitment to equal opportunity and asked the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness to conduct a “study of the officer ‘pipeline,’ and where necessary, to recommend ways to improve the flow of minority and female officers from recruitment through general and flag officer ranks.” The research documented in this report was undertaken in support of this officer pipeline study (Gilroy et al., 1999).

**MOTIVATION AND CONTEXT FOR THE OFFICER PIPELINE STUDY**

To motivate his equal opportunity directives, Secretary Perry referred to the military’s proud history as a leader “in expanding opportunities for minority groups,” to DoD employees’ right to “carry out their jobs without discrimination or harassment,” and to the “military and economic necessity” of equal opportunity.

The memorandum was written at a time when equal opportunity and harassment were issues of general public concern and changing legal status. Some similar issues had appeared in the military in the 1990s. For example, several highly publicized incidents of harassment of women service members had occurred, notably at the Tailhook Convention in 1991.

More generally, data showed patterns of decreasing diversity with rank. In 1994, a higher percentage of junior officers than senior officers were women or minorities (Figure 1). In contrast, the enlisted force included more minorities than either officer group at all levels of seniority and showed no diversity differences between the junior and senior ranks. As a result there were potentially undesirable differences in racial and ethnic diversity between the “rank and file” and their leadership. On the other hand, women made up the same fraction of the enlisted and officer groups at junior and senior ranks.

---

3 This pattern has not changed in the past few years. (Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, 1998)
At first glance, these patterns of declining diversity at more senior ranks are not surprising. There are bound to be relatively few minority and female senior officers because minorities accounted for under 4 percent of the officers commissioned 25 to 30 years ago, when today’s senior officers entered service, and women accounted for no more than 2 percent of new officers in those years. Based on these numbers, we can infer that much of the difference between the junior and senior officer ranks in 1994 was probably historical. However, we cannot rule out the possibility that some of the diversity gap resulted from lower rates of career progression for minority and women officers who entered service at various points in time. To disentangle the effects of increasing diversity at entry with the effects of any subsequent differences in career progression, one must track groups of entering officers over time and measure the promotion and retention rates for different racial, ethnic, and gender groups.

A November 1995 General Accounting Office (GAO) report included a more direct analysis of racial and gender disparities in accessions, assignments, and promotions. The report found some disparities, with the most common ones for officers occurring in promotions. However, as the GAO report noted, their analysis was relatively
straightforward, and more detailed and comprehensive information is needed to determine whether DoD’s equal opportunity goal is being met. The purpose of this project is to add information and understanding.

GENERAL STUDY DESIGN

The project examined the career progression of minority and female officers, compared with white male officers, through two strands of research. The first strand analyzed officer personnel records to determine whether minority and female officers had been promoted and retained at the same rates as white male officers. The second strand consisted of interviews with individuals who manage officers and select them for promotion, and both interviews and focus groups involving middle-ranking officers (primarily grades O-3 and O-4). The interviews with the officer management staff in each service focused on the policies and procedures that direct officer careers. Our purpose in talking to members of promotion boards was to understand the board process and identify key factors leading to promotion for all officers. The interviews and focus groups with midcareer officers explored how officers generally progress in their careers and real or perceived differences in the experiences of minority and female officers. Most of the minority officers in the interviews and focus groups were black, but some Hispanic officers participated as well.

The data analysis evaluated the personnel records of officers from seven commissioning cohorts: 1967, 1970, 1977, 1980, 1983, 1987, and 1991. We tracked the members of each cohort until they left service or through 1994. We interviewed personnel managers and policy implementers at each service’s headquarters and personnel center. We visited four bases, one from each service, to talk to a cross-section of officers in the middle ranks. These discussions, which were conducted in mid-1995, were carried out through one-on-one interviews and in focus groups organized by race and gender.

---

4 This data file was originally constructed for the Naval Postgraduate School. It included data for the 1997 cohort, but we dropped this cohort from our analysis because it had extensive data errors that could not be easily corrected.
We talked to white male officers as well as minority and female officers.

In fiscal year (FY) 1995, the racial/ethnic composition of officers in the middle ranks were (across all services): 86 percent white, 8 percent black, 3 percent Hispanic, and 3 percent other racial/ethnic groups. Hispanics are a diverse group, with many socioeconomic and cultural differences between the subgroups (e.g., Cuban Americans, Mexican Americans). The final group, which we call “other,” is similarly diverse. Our data analysis considered all of these groups. However, we largely limited the interviews and focus groups to white and black officers (male and female) because it was not possible within this project’s scope to adequately explore career issues with the other racial/ethnic groups. Other research has found that military career experiences differ for blacks and other minorities.

Both study components only considered officers not belonging to professional occupations. Officers in the professions—e.g., physicians, nurses, dentists, chaplains, and lawyers—are managed separately in all services except the Marine Corps and often have atypical career patterns. This restriction to line officers most affected our analysis of female officers because one-half of them are in professional occupations, primarily in health. In contrast, just over one-fifth of both white and black officers are in these occupations.

**ORGANIZATION OF THE REPORT**

The next chapter provides an overview of officer careers, the performance evaluation and promotion selection processes in each service, and specific policies or practices affecting minorities and women. Chapter Three describes our analysis of officer personnel records and Chapters Four and Five summarize the results of our interviews and focus groups with midcareer officers. Both chapters include a summary of the analytic methods used, but they focus on the results. Additional technical details are included in the appendices to the re-

---

5 These data are from the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Force Management Policy), 1996, and are for officers in the O-3 and O-4 pay grades (see Chapter Two for an explanation of pay grades). The data for FY 1997 are similar; whites decreased to 85 percent and other minorities increased to 4 percent.
port. The final chapter integrates the findings from the two analyses in an overall assessment of the career progression of black and female officers.