The operational pace of the United States military has increased dramatically since the end of the Cold War. With an officer corps 31-percent smaller in 2000 compared with 1986, today’s military personnel face deployments of increasing frequency, many of which are unplanned and unforeseen.

It is often asserted that this increase in operational tempo has a negative effect on personnel retention. The most commonly cited evidence comes from surveys of servicemembers about their likes and dislikes of military service. Here we evaluate actual behavior, by linking measures of deployment by individual officer to information about if and when each officer leaves the military, to determine whether increased deployments are in fact associated with decreased retention.

The audiences for whom this report is intended include military and civilian officials responsible for doctrine and policy related to the retention and promotion of U.S. military officers, as well as the wider defense policy community concerned with the effects of perstempo on force readiness and personnel retention.

This research was conducted for the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Force Management Policy) within the Forces and Resources Policy Center of RAND’s National Defense Research Institute, a federally funded research and development center sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, the unified commands, and the defense agencies.