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# Indefinite Reenlistment and Noncommissioned Officers

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Prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense

Approved for public release; distribution unlimited



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The research described in this report was prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD). The research was conducted in the RAND National Defense Research Institute, a federally funded research and development center sponsored by the OSD, the Joint Staff, the Unified Combatant Commands, the Department of the Navy, the Marine Corps, the defense agencies, and the defense Intelligence Community under Contract W74V8H-06-C-0002.

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Indefinite reenlistment and noncommissioned officers / Laura Miller ... [et al.].

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8330-4043-5 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. United States—Armed Forces—Recruiting, enlistment, etc. 2. United States.

Army—Non-commissioned officers—Recruiting, enlistment, etc.

I. Miller, Laura L., 1967– II. Rand Corporation.

UB323.I54 2007

355.2'2362—dc22

2007002184

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Published 2007 by the RAND Corporation

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## Summary

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### **The Army Pioneered Indefinite Reenlistment in the United States**

In 1998, the Army shifted its senior enlisted force from a fixed enlistment contract system to indefinite reenlistment. The stated intention was to recognize senior NCOs as career soldiers and thereby increase their prestige. The Army program was designed to meet this goal by eliminating the reenlistment requirement in the latter half of the NCO's career and by placing senior NCOs on the same indefinite service contract as officers. Over 90 percent of soldiers with a rank of E-6 or higher with ten or more years of service remain in the Army until retirement. The indefinite reenlistment policy requires all soldiers reaching the rank of E-6 with ten years of service to reenlist indefinitely. Their new separation date becomes either the year they are required to leave the service if not promoted or their retirement date, whichever occurs first. Soldiers may self-initiate separation if they have met all other service obligations through moves, schooling, retraining, or deployment. This program mirrors the management of officers and eliminates the need for career NCOs to repeatedly fill out reenlistment paperwork. The Army is satisfied with the program and has no plans to change it. This monograph presents the findings of the first study of the Army's program to determine whether it has met its primary goals, namely increasing the prestige of the NCO corps.

## **The Other Services Have Rejected Indefinite Reenlistment**

The Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force could have adopted similar programs following congressional approval in 1997, but each considered and then rejected open-ended enlistments. Their primary concerns were that force planning would be more difficult if troops' actual separation dates were unpredictable, that the quality of the NCO corps would drop if the reenlistment screening mechanism were eliminated, and that retention of senior NCOs with critical skills would suffer because of the loss of reenlistment bonuses. Furthermore, these services were concerned that NCO morale would drop, rather than increase, because service members would lose benefits, bargaining power, and the meaningful ceremonies that accompany reenlistment.

## **Focus Group Participants Argue That Indefinite Reenlistment Is Undesirable and Not Linked to Retention**

Although Army NCO continuation rates were relatively unchanged during the transition to indefinite reenlistment, focus group data suggest some confusion and dissatisfaction with the program among senior enlisted personnel. The NCOs we were able to interview believed that indefinite reenlistment did not boost prestige, and the junior enlisted personnel were generally unaware that their leaders were not serving under shorter-term fixed contracts similar to their own. Soldiers perceived the policy as one that restricts their options as they gain seniority and knowledge in exchange for a negligible reduction in reenlistment paperwork.

Focus groups with Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force personnel revealed objections to the implementation of indefinite reenlistment status for their senior enlisted officers. Sailors and Marines reported that their senior NCOs already enjoyed a high level of prestige, and that they had no desire for NCOs' terms of service to mimic those of officers. Service members from each of these branches also raised concerns that indefinite reenlistment would retain poor performers and reduce promotion and leadership opportunities for quality junior per-

sonnel. Marines in particular said they would lament the loss of the reenlistment ceremony, a significant ritual of service commitment. Air Force personnel were concerned about the loss of reenlistment bonuses for people they believed to have earned them the most. None of the focus group participants felt that the reenlistment process was burdensome or worth the potential negative consequences of shifting to indefinite reenlistment.

Despite the generally negative opinion of the indefinite reenlistment program, none of the service members in our study said that an indefinite service contract did or would influence their decision to reenlist or remain in the military.

## **Indefinite Reenlistment Has Little to Offer as a Force Management Tool**

Consideration of possible functions that indefinite reenlistment might play in force management reveals no significant improvement or cost savings relative to tools currently available in each of the services for managing recruitment, retention, skill mix, or size of the force.

This study recommends that the Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force continue their current reenlistment programs for senior NCOs. There is no evidence, however, that the Army's program is producing any degree of harm that warrants reversion to fixed contracts; therefore, we also recommend adherence to the status quo for the Army's senior reenlistment policy.