

# Striving for Diversity

## Observations on Racial and Ethnic Talent in the Regular Army's Senior Officer Corps

One of the U.S. Army's top personnel goals, set forth in *The Army People Strategy*, issued in early fiscal year (FY) 2020, is to recruit and retain a force that reflects the diversity of the U.S. population. Achieving these aims means not only bringing a diverse group of individuals into the Army but also retaining and promoting them into leadership positions as their careers progress.

To help accomplish these goals, the Army asked RAND Arroyo Center to analyze retention of racial and ethnic minorities in the Army to better understand how the diversity of the force changes as cohorts progress through the ranks. This research brief focuses on diversity and career progression of commissioned officers.

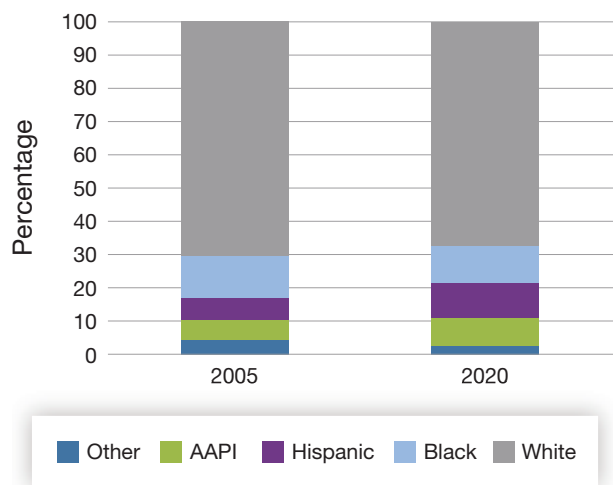
### Racial and Ethnic Composition of Junior Officers

The racial and ethnic composition of junior entrants into the Army sets the stage for who the Army can ultimately retain and, in turn, promote to senior officer positions. The racial and ethnic diversity of the Army's junior officers has increased over the past 15 years, with the proportion who were racial and ethnic minorities increasing from 29 percent in FY 2005 to 33 percent in FY 2020 (Figure 1). Of that 33 percent, 11 percent were Black, 10 percent Hispanic, 9 percent Asian American and Pacific Islander

### KEY FINDINGS

- Racial and ethnic minority officers are more likely to choose to remain in the Army than their White counterparts.
- However, promotion rates for officers in racial and ethnic minority groups are lower than their White counterparts.
- If historical differences persist, the net effect would be a senior officer cohort that is *less* diverse than today's junior officers.
- To the extent that promotion differences by race and ethnicity can be reduced, the diversity of senior officer cohorts would improve.
- Preliminary evidence suggests that removing the official photograph and other racial and ethnic identifiers from promotion packets reviewed by officer selection boards is associated with higher promotion rates for racial and ethnic minority officers.

FIGURE 1  
Racial and Ethnic Composition of Junior Commissioned Officers in Fiscal Years 2005 and 2020



SOURCE: Authors' tabulation of the September 2005 and 2020 Total Army Personnel Data Base and 2005 and 2020 Current Population Survey.

(AAPI), and 3 percent from other racial or ethnic minorities. Overall, racial and ethnic diversity reflected among junior officers gives the Army an *opportunity* to develop a diverse group of leaders. How that plays out depends on retention and promotion rates over the course of an officer's career.

## Officer Career Progression

Officer career progression can be considered as a series of two types of decision points:

1. whether an officer remains in the Army until the point at which they are eligible for promotion to the next grade, referred to as *retention*
2. whether an officer is promoted to the next grade, referred to as *promotion*.

Examining each type of decision point separately revealed interesting insights with respect to racial and ethnic diversity.

### Officer Retention

**Racial and ethnic minorities have *higher* retention than White officers.**

Retention rates for second lieutenants (O-1s) and first lieutenants (O-2s) are typically very high—90 per-

cent or higher—because officers have generally not completed their active-duty service obligation. Accordingly, differences in retention rates across racial and ethnic groups are relatively small.

Although differences in retention are small, the *reasons* some second and first lieutenants separate early show larger differences that are of interest: Racial and ethnic minorities are more likely to separate for performance or conduct reasons. Twenty-four percent of White O-1s separate for these reasons, but the percentages of Hispanic (37 percent) and Black (43 percent) O-1s are much higher. Similarly, 8 percent of White O-2s separate for performance or conduct reasons, but the percentages for Hispanic and Black O-2s are 18 percent and 22 percent, respectively. In contrast, the most common reason that White officers separate at this point in their careers is medical or disability.

The available data do not reveal the nature of these performance or conduct reasons or why incidences are higher among racial and ethnic minorities, but further understanding of these trends is worthwhile and could lead to improved retention.

Officers typically complete their active-duty service obligation with the rank of captain, so O-3 retention rates provide more insight into the extent to which different racial and ethnic groups are choosing to stay in the Army or leave. At this decision point, retention rates are much lower than at earlier grades, falling to 49 percent for White officers (Figure 2). Racial and ethnic minority groups have *higher* retention than their White counterparts—between 51 and 64 percent.

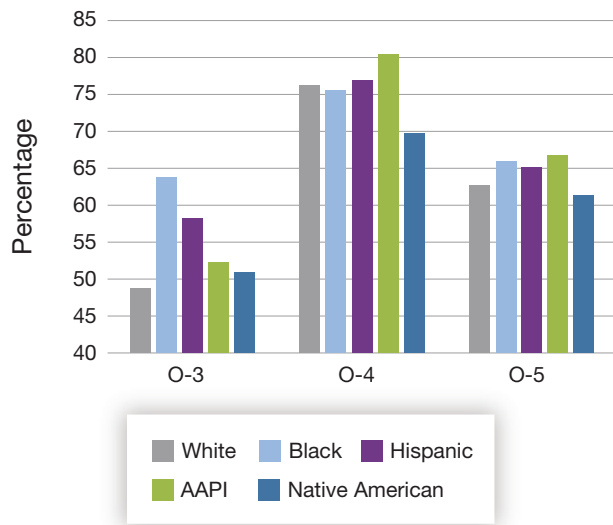
At the grades of major (O-4) and lieutenant colonel (O-5), retention rates are higher than those at O-3. But the overall observation of higher retention rates for most racial and ethnic minority groups holds, although the difference in retention rates between White and racial and ethnic minorities is generally smaller.

### Officer Promotion

**Racial and ethnic minorities have *lower* promotion rates than White officers.**

At the earliest promotion opportunities, to O-2 and O-3, there are some small but statistically significant differences between White officers and Black and Hispanic officers for promotion to O-2 and also for AAPI officers for promotion to O-3. In each of these cases, promotion rates for racial and ethnic minority officers are lower.

FIGURE 2  
Officer Retention by Race and Ethnicity Group



SOURCE: Authors' tabulation of monthly data from the Total Army Personnel Data Base on all commissioned officers from October 2001 through January 2022.

For AAPI officers, promotion rates to O-4 are 2.5 percentage points lower than for White officers. The gaps are even larger for Hispanic (3.3 percentage points), Native American (3.6 percentage points), and Black (5.1 percentage points) officers promoting to O-4 (Figure 3).

At each promotion point, some officers are promoted earlier than their peers; these are referred to as *below-the-zone promotions*. Below-the-zone promotion rates are also significantly lower for racial and ethnic minority officers. For promotion to O-4, Hispanic officers are 45 percent less likely to be promoted below the zone than are White officers, and Black officers are 39 percent less likely to be promoted below the zone, for example.

Similar differences are observed for promotion to lieutenant colonel (O-5) and colonel (O-6): Most racial and ethnic minority groups have lower promotion rates than their White counterparts. Gaps tend to be largest for Hispanic and Black officers. Racial and ethnic minority groups are also less likely to receive below-the-zone promotions to lieutenant colonel than their White counterparts.

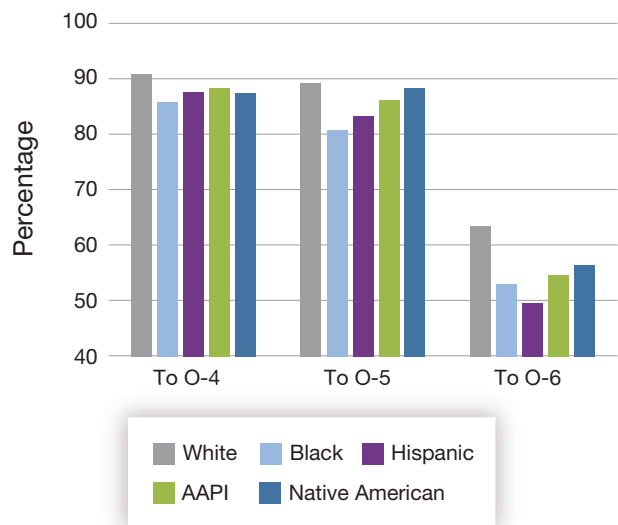
Why promotion rates for racial and ethnic minority officers lag is unclear. The project team conducted additional research to explore whether factors other than race—such as gender, age, dependents, or

occupation—might contribute to these differences. The findings suggested that, for certain groups of officers at different career points, other factors do matter and narrow the gap in promotion rates or change the relationship between White officers and those in racial and ethnic minority groups. Yet, in general, these factors cannot completely explain the observed differences.

### Cumulative Effects

Because retention and promotion patterns are in opposite directions, the net effect on racial and ethnic diversity of the officer corps over time depends on the relative magnitude of these differences. The team simulated how racial and ethnic representation would change over the career life cycle if the historical differences persisted. The net effect is that officers who will eventually be promoted to colonel are more likely to be White and less likely to be Hispanic than the entry cohort. The percentages of Black and AAPI officers are not predicted to change, but the overall prediction is less racial and ethnic diversity among Army leaders. However, if historical differences in racial and ethnic representation are disrupted—for example, because of the influence of personnel management decisions or changing trends in officer career choices—future colonels could be more diverse than the entry cohort.

FIGURE 3  
Officer Promotion Rates by Race and Ethnicity Group



SOURCE: Authors' tabulation of monthly data from the Total Army Personnel Data Base on all commissioned officers from October 2001 through January 2022.

## Race and Ethnicity Identification Data for Selection Boards

On June 26, 2020, the Army announced that, effective August 1, 2020, it would suspend the requirement to include official photos for selection boards and that any data that identify race, ethnicity, or gender would be redacted. The intent of this policy change was to ensure that the promotion process was fair, impartial, and consistent with Army values.

While relatively little time has passed since this policy was implemented, analysis shows some evidence that these changes are associated with improved outcomes for racial and ethnic minority groups and no evidence that the changes are associated with adverse outcomes. The difference in promotion rates between White officers and racial and ethnic minority officers was narrower after the policy change, mainly for promotion to O-4. Although continued data collection and follow-on analysis will need to be conducted as more selection boards convene, these results are promising.

## Next Steps for the Army

Diversity of talent is a strategic Army goal. The research findings presented here motivated some steps for the Army to consider as it continues to work toward improvements in representation within the officer corps.

**Continue to monitor promotion rates.** Preliminary evidence indicates that removing race and ethnicity identification data from officer selection boards is associated with improved promotion outcomes for racial and ethnic minority groups. These results are early indicators—the analysis reflects only two years of the policy in place—but the Army should continue to monitor these trends.

**Examine differences in performance and conduct issues.** Officers in racial and ethnic minority groups are more likely to leave the Army because of problems in performance or conduct compared with their White counterparts. The Army should investigate these outcomes in depth to assess the causes of these differences and develop appropriate mitigation strategies. The focus should be on early career stages, where the data show racial and ethnic group differences in reasons for separation.

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This brief describes work done in RAND Arroyo Center and documented in *Retention of Racial-Ethnic Minorities in the Regular Army*, by Maria C. Lytell, Michael L. Hansen, Avery Calkins, Matthew D. Baird, Nastassia Reed, Kristin J. Leuschner, and Clifford A. Grammich, RR-A2011-1, 2023 (available at [www.rand.org/t/RRA2011-1](http://www.rand.org/t/RRA2011-1)). To view this brief online, visit [www.rand.org/t/RBA2011-1](http://www.rand.org/t/RBA2011-1). The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. **RAND**® is a registered trademark.

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