

Impact of Eligibility Requirements and Propensity to Serve on Demographic Representation in the Department of the Air Force

The U.S. Department of the Air Force (DAF) has been working for some time to improve the representation of women and racial and ethnic minorities in its ranks and officer corps so that the DAF reflects the nation that it serves. RAND Corporation research suggests that benchmarking DAF accessions against the general U.S. population lacks important context because it compares DAF demographics to a general population that includes large numbers of people who are neither eligible to serve nor attracted to military service. In addition, RAND research demonstrates that representation of women from a particular racial or ethnic group in the DAF might differ from that of men from the same group relative to a population benchmark; similarly, representation compared with benchmarks within one gender may differ across race and

KEY FINDINGS

- Examining eligibility by considering gender concurrently with race and ethnicity reveals important differences not otherwise observed when assessing these groups separately.
- Eligibility requirements limit racial and ethnic minority representation, but these groups get a boost in representation from their high propensity to serve in the military.
- Eligibility requirements favor the representation of women, but they have less propensity to serve.
- The biggest barriers to eligibility for both enlisted and officers are body mass index, height, and education and aptitude requirements, but these requirements affect the eligibility of gender and racial and ethnic groups differently.
- Considering gender and race and ethnicity jointly, no minority group meets the demographic benchmarks of the U.S. population that is both eligible and has a propensity to serve across the three accession sources (enlisted, U.S. Air Force Academy, and Reserve Officers Training Corps or Officer Training School).

ethnicity. Comparisons with a population benchmark by gender or by race and ethnicity alone mask such differences.

This brief summarizes RAND Project AIR FORCE (PAF) research on a process that provides more-relevant benchmarks for assessing DAF demographics and that accurately reflects important gender and racial and ethnic differences.

Approach

The project team used a statistical method that RAND developed to estimate the distribution of gender and race and ethnicity in the U.S. population that is eligible and has a propensity to serve in the military. For eligibility, the analysis used multiple survey-based data sources to assess major factors—age, education, number of children, marital status, body composition, health, aptitude, moral character, and drug use—that narrow the field of eligible candidates. For propensity, the analysis used the annual

Monitoring the Future survey of approximately 15,000 12th graders to assess attraction to military service. The team presented benchmarking results for enlisted accessions and for new officers by the source of their accessions: (1) USAFA and (2) ROTC or OTS (see Table 1).

Conclusion

The PAF project team’s findings suggest that the DAF should consider gender and race and ethnicity jointly when benchmarking DAF accessions. Examining the intersection of gender and race and ethnicity allows for a more accurate view of the effects of eligibility requirements on demographic distributions. Although the body mass index and height requirements and minimum standards for education and aptitude are barriers for individuals of all races and ethnicities, these criteria affect each gender and racial and ethnic group to a different degree. These differences are important for understanding the representation of demographic subgroups in the DAF.

TABLE 1
Representation in the DAF at the Intersection of Gender and Race and Ethnicity

Race or Ethnicity	Gender	Enlisted Accessions Versus		USAFA Accessions Versus		ROTC or OTS Accessions Versus	
		E	E&P	E	E&P	E	E&P
Asian	Men	188	-879	18	-29	24	-70
	Women	-1,221	-731	-11	3	-218	-148
Black	Men	2,542	2,016	35	28	32	-26
	Women	472	261	0	-4	-62	-77
Hispanic	Men	2,163	1,312	-32	-55	115	95
	Women	-668	-198	-48	-35	-169	-101
Other	Men	-175	-494	32	21	7	-31
	Women	-423	-284	1	5	-61	-39
White	Men	3,740	153	164	25	549	447
	Women	-6,619	-1,156	-158	40	-1,073	-229

NOTE: Green indicates that DAF accessions surpass the benchmark; yellow indicates that accessions are 0 to 5 percentage points below the benchmark; and red indicates that accessions are more than 5 percentage points below the benchmark. Negative numbers represent the additional accessions needed to meet the benchmark. E = eligible benchmark; E&P = eligible and propensed benchmark; OTS = Officer Training School; ROTC = Reserve Officers Training Corps; USAFA = U.S. Air Force Academy.

This brief describes work done in RAND Project AIR FORCE and documented in *Population Benchmarking for the U.S. Department of the Air Force: Impact of Eligibility Requirements and Propensity to Serve on Demographic Representation*, by Tiffany Berglund, Louis T. Mariano, and Christopher E. Maerzluft, RR-A988-1-v2, 2023 (available at www.rand.org/t/RR-A988-1-v2). To view this brief online, visit www.rand.org/t/RBA988-1. 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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