



Life as a Private

A Study of the Motivations and Experiences of Junior Enlisted Personnel in the U.S. Army

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The U.S. Army Recruiting Command asked RAND Arroyo Center to undertake research to improve its understanding of soldiers' motivations to join the Army, and how the reality of Army life matches up with expectations. This study's portrayal of the U.S. Army private could serve as an educational tool for a variety of important audiences, such as Army senior leadership, junior officers, noncommissioned officers, and prospective new recruits.



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Who joins the Army, why do they join, and how satisfied are they with their decisions?



KEY FINDINGS

Soldiers Join the Army for Family, Institutional, and Occupational Reasons

- The importance of family is a recurring feature in the narratives of soldiers.
- Soldiers cite call to serve and perception of honor, but also thirst for adventure, benefits, and pay.

Many Soldiers Value the Opportunity to Become a Military Professional

- Most soldiers in the research sample acknowledged the unique benefits that they got from Army service.
- Despite generally favorable experiences overall, soldiers are frustrated by the bureaucratic characteristics of work in the Army.
- The information soldiers consume prior to joining their first unit may influence expectations about Army service; more accurate information than that derived from action movies might improve satisfaction with their real experience.

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Soldiers Value Relationships with Other Soldiers as a Critical Feature of Army Life

- The critical importance of camaraderie and good small-unit leadership suggests avenues to enhance soldier recruitment and retention.

Most Soldiers Enjoy Positive Well-Being and Satisfying Social Lives

- Most soldiers in the research sample said that their leadership and peers were an important source of support.
- In fact, leadership and fellow soldiers were cited as the most important source of motivation, camaraderie, and overall social support.

Soldiers in the Sample Were Satisfied with Army Life

- A variety of factors affect soldiers' intent to reenlist, such as family concerns, injuries, promotions, civilian opportunities, and the likelihood of deploying to war. The majority of soldiers believed their Army service would help them find future work.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- Consider emphasizing occupational benefits and adding social bonds to the current Army Value Proposition (AVP).
- Highlight social bonds as part of reenlistment campaigns.
- Consider incentivizing first-term soldiers who successfully recruit from their friends and peer networks.
- Ensure recruiters provide accurate information about military occupational specialties.
- Improve the accuracy of information about Army life that new recruits receive.
- Following Basic Combat Training/Advanced Individual Training and One-Station Unit Training, provide accurate information about installations and unit assignments.
- Maintain or expand recruitment programs that build parental support.
- Help leaders engage soldiers in relevant and educational tasks and otherwise use soldiers' time more effectively.