Organizational and Cultural Causes of Army First-Term Attrition

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The U.S. Army invests significant resources in new soldiers. When a soldier does not complete a full contract term, the Army views this as a net loss. This report assesses whether organizational factors matter for producing attrition and generates hypotheses regarding the mechanisms by which organizational factors generate attrition.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

• Do organizational factors (e.g., deployment cycle, peer characteristics, and command culture), as well as institutional factors (e.g., norms and processes in the implementation of Army directives) related to a soldier’s experience in the Army, contribute to first-term attrition?
• Are there opportunities to reduce attrition related to these factors?

KEY FINDINGS

A soldier’s first assignment can substantially affect probability of failing to adapt

• Regardless of the location to which a soldier is assigned, the particular combination of battalion and senior NCO can alter the probability of failing to adapt by several percentage points (upward or downward). Even within an installation, the probability of two new junior enlisted soldiers failing to adapt can differ by several percentage points depending on the battalions to which those soldiers are first assigned.
• There is a systematic relationship between a combined battalion and NCO effect on failure to adapt and the effect on reenlistment.
• Although attrition outcomes vary somewhat with the tenure of different senior NCOs, attrition in a particular battalion is “sticky.” That is, battalions with particularly high or low attrition maintain that
status when the senior NCO rotates out.

Leadership, experience with jobs, training calendar, and social support all matter

• Unit-level NCOs appear to play an outsized role in attrition outcomes. These busy NCOs have discretion in whom they decide to invest time to provide guidance and mentorship.

• Soldiers indicated that the pace of training calendars made adapting to Army life difficult. This was further exacerbated by their lack of understanding of why certain training exercises were necessary.

• Soldiers reported that barracks conditions detracted from quality of life, and location was critical to a soldier’s quality-of-life assessment.

• Social support appears to offer some possibility to arrest cycles of soldier decline that may end in attrition, while family life may actually contribute to attrition.

RECOMMENDATIONS

• Better manage the timing of new soldier assignments.

• Train and equip recruiters to advise enlisting soldiers on critical aspects of their enlistment, including match to MOS, benefits, and other aspects of Army life.

• Provide training and support to NCOs preparing to take on a leadership position.

• Learn why NCOs may provide more support to some soldiers over others.

• Consider adopting a model of attrition that allows for a greater degree of complexity and interplay between quitting and firing behaviors.

• Further explore the link between attrition and reenlistment.