

**OPENING STATEMENT OF U.S. SENATOR JACK REED
CHAIRMAN, SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE**

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[To receive testimony on the recruiting challenges for the United States military](#)
(As prepared for delivery)

REED: Good morning. The committee meets today to discuss the recruiting challenges facing the United States military.

I would like to welcome our witnesses, Mr. Gabriel Camarillo, Under Secretary of the Army; Mr. Erik Raven, Under Secretary of the Navy; and Ms. Kristyn Jones, Performing the Duties of the Under Secretary of the Air Force. Thank you for your leadership and for joining us today.

The United States military faces the most challenging recruiting environment in the 50-year history of the all-volunteer force. As America continues to recover from two decades of war and a global pandemic, the military services are having significant difficulties filling their ranks. Last year, the force fell tens of thousands of recruits short of its goals, and the same appears likely this year.

There are several factors contributing to this situation. To begin, America has seen record-low unemployment for several years. Even in the best of times, a strong economy and low national unemployment have always made military recruitment difficult.

Further, the number of young Americans qualified or interested in military service is declining. Only 23 percent of Americans aged 17-24 are eligible to serve, as national obesity rates continue to rise and standardized mental aptitude test scores continue to fall. To compound this issue, less than 10 percent of the population have a propensity to serve – the lowest point in decades.

Additionally, unlike the days of the draft when virtually every American knew about the military, today, most young Americans do not know anyone personally who has served in the military, and they are unaware of the many benefits of military service. The military services are starting to look like a “family” business,

where children of servicemembers and veterans enlist at far higher rates than their peers who do not come from a military background.

Also, as our military facilities are increasingly based in fewer and fewer states, our personnel have become less geographically representative of the nation. The smaller the military's footprint becomes, the greater the perception grows of a divide between civilian and military cultures. Our military should reflect all of American society, not stand apart from it.

Last year, the Department of Defense conducted an extensive survey of young Americans to better understand why they were overwhelmingly uninterested in military service. By a wide margin, the top three reasons the respondents cited were the same across all the services: fear of death or injury, worries about PTSD, and separation from friends and family.

We know that our servicemembers have sacrificed much in the defense of our nation, but we also know that widespread fears of death, injury, and PTSD are out of sync with the experiences of most veterans. Survey and census data show that the overwhelming majority of veterans report positive experiences in the military. America's veterans are more civically engaged, earn more money, and have more education than those who have not served. In short, military service is a social good—it benefits the nation, and it benefits those who serve.

Currently, the services are challenged to convince young people to join the military. Once they don the uniform, however, servicemembers are more likely than ever to re-enlist and stay in the military by choice. Retention is at an all-time high even as recruiting faces significant headwinds.

The many benefits of military service are the result of a decades-long campaign to attract and retain the best talent our country has to offer. The military services offer education and training in emerging fields like cyber and artificial intelligence; unparalleled family support programs; comprehensive health and wellness benefits; pathways to higher education, both in and out of uniform; and the best leadership training and experience in the world.

I want to briefly return to the issue of young Americans' propensity to serve. As mentioned, the vast majority of the population chooses not to serve due concerns about perceived physical and mental risks and separation from loved ones. But, in an effort to understand more about the current recruiting environment, the Army has been conducting frequent "pulse" surveys to gather more opinions from potential recruits. In its most recent study, one issue that did *not* deter recruits from

enlisting in significant numbers was the idea of the military being “woke.” I mention this term only because it was used in the survey, but I have yet to hear it defined as an actual policy or articulated position. Only a small fraction, 5 percent of respondents, said they felt the military places too much emphasis on “wokeness.”

Let me be clear: diversity and inclusion strengthens our military. By every measure, America’s military is more lethal and ready than it has ever been. It is also more diverse and inclusive than ever before. This is not a coincidence. Our military looks more and more like the nation it represents, whether in race, gender, creed, sexuality, or any other measure. This is the right direction, as America’s strength is its diversity. But greater diversity requires greater understanding within the ranks, and understanding requires learning, and regular training. The fundamental bond that assures unit cohesion is the commitment by every member to protect his or her fellow servicemembers, whoever they may be. This is a state of mind and heart that must be nurtured by training and example.

Our military’s greatest asset is its people. We cannot succeed if do not have adequate numbers of men and women, of sufficiently high character, contributing to our national defense. During today’s hearing, I would like to know our witnesses’ ideas for increasing the number of young Americans eligible for and interested in service.

Thank you, again, to our witnesses. I look forward to your testimonies.

Let me now recognize Ranking Member Wicker.