



**National
Military Family
Association**

BLOOM
EMPOWERING THE MILITARY TEEN



2023 Military Teen Experience Survey: Propensity and Work

Military service is often a family affair, with more than a [quarter](#) of the young people currently serving having a parent who also served. However, recent [numbers](#) indicate that the number of military families recommending the military lifestyle are decreasing. A recent Department of Defense (DoD) [study](#) estimates only 9% civilians aged 16-24 are planning on joining the military.

In 2022, we found that 44% of our respondents were planning to serve. We continue to find the military-connected population has significantly greater propensity to serve than the wider population. Understanding why military-connected youth do or do not want to join is important regarding recruitment and retention, especially considering the recent recruitment [concerns](#) across all branches of service.

What We Asked

Along with assessing propensity, this year we also asked our military teens about their main reasons for joining or choosing not to join the military. Response options were pulled from the DoD's Fall 2021 Propensity [update](#).

Reasons to Join	Reasons to Not Join
Pay/money	Other career interests
To pay for future education	Don't believe I would qualify
Travel	Possibility of physical injury/death
Health and medical benefits	Possibility of PTSD or other emotional/psychological issues
Gain experience/work skills	Leaving family and friends
To help others	Possibility of interference with college education
Pension and retirement benefits	Too long of a commitment
Experience adventure	Dislike of military lifestyle
To better my life	Required to live in places I don't want to live in
Make a positive difference in my community	Possibility of sexual harassment/assault

What We Found

Plans to Serve

Nearly 1 in 3 (32%) respondents plan to serve.

This is nearly four times greater than the number of civilians planning to serve. However, compared to our 2022 numbers, propensity has decreased by approximately 12 percentage points. It's important to note that our data is cross-sectional, meaning the same respondents are not completing the survey both years. We cannot speculate about the cause of this decrease (especially because our two samples are different) however, general [disapproval](#) of the handling of the withdrawal from Afghanistan and decreased [confidence](#) in the military may help explain this trend.

Additionally, we found almost 1% of our young adult respondents are currently serving.

Joining the Military

plan to join after receiving a college education (i.e., senior military college/services academy, ROTC, or OCS).
(67%)

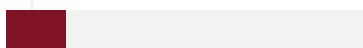


plan to enlist (26%)

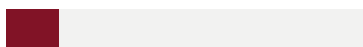


Reasons for Joining

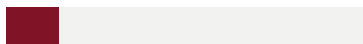
help others (17%)



paying for future education (15%)

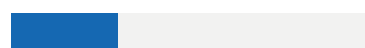


gaining work experience and skills (15%)

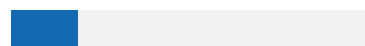


Reasons for Not Joining

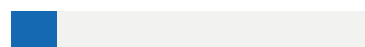
other career interests (30%)



dislike of the military lifestyle (19%)



not believing they would qualify (13%)



Military Youth in Their Own Words

To gain more insight into the reasons military-connected youth may not want to join the service, we asked them to expand on their reasons in a short-response question.

“I am not interested in serving in the military because I have other career plans. I also think that, while serving in the military is a great honor and selfless duty, it is not for everyone. I think it would be very hard too. Being a military child is already hard enough, so I'm not sure I would like to continue that in my adult life. A fellow military child once said to me, “Although some people consider me selfish for not having the desire to serve, I believe that while my parent has served our country, I have served my time too.” Although we are not technically on the front lines, I still believe we have an impact on others as well as our environment.”

-14 year old daughter of an Army service member

“I would be fine with joining the military but there are other jobs that I would enjoy more. I really like teaching and want to pursue an education degree and work in a DoDEA school. The military would be a good, stable job, but I would rather teach.”

-22 year old son of an Air Force Officer

“I would consider joining the military after I have experienced other career options. But for now I want to attempt something new in my future.”

-16 year old son of a Navy service member





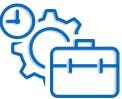
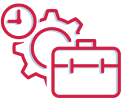


Demographic Differences

Age







Teens are statistically less likely to report planning to join (0.8 times less likely).

We asked if respondents planned to join and how they plan to do so. Most young adults plan to join the military after receiving a college education (77%; i.e. enrolling in a military or service academy, Officer Candidate School, or a Reserves Officers' Training Corps program). More teens than young adults plan to join the military by enlisting (29% vs. 21%).

Teens and young adults have different top reasons for joining, but the second- and third-most popular choices are the same across age groups.

Teens	Young Adult
 To pay for future education	 To help others
 Gain work experience/skills	 Gain work experience/skills
 Health/medical benefits	 Health/medical benefits







Teens and young adults appear to have similar reasons for not joining the military, though young adults are more worried about the possibility of physical injury/death than teens are.

Teens	Young Adult
 Other career interests	 Don't believe I would qualify
 Dislike of military lifestyle	 Other career interests AND Possibility of physical injury/death
 Don't believe I would qualify	 Dislike of military lifestyle

Gender

Significantly more boys than girls plan on serving (43% vs. 20%).

The top three reasons for joining the military were similar between boys and girls.

Girls	Boys
 To pay for future education	 To help others
 Health/medical benefits	 Gain work experience/skills
 To help others	 Health/medical benefits

Girls and boys had the same top three reasons for not joining the military.


Other career interests


Dislike of military lifestyle


Don't believe I would qualify



Race

Propensity to serve was highest among American Indian/Alaskan Native (62%) and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander respondents (59%), although sample sizes for these groups were low (21 and 17, respectively). Propensity was lowest among bi- or multiracial respondents (17%; $n = 84$). Because of the limited number of non-White respondents, care should be taken when considering these findings.

Connection to Military Life

Propensity was lowest among respondents with an active-duty parent or guardian (22%) and highest among respondents with a National Guard or Reserve parent or guardian (65%).

Service Member Injury

Propensity was lowest among respondents with a parent or guardian without a service-connected wound, illness, or injury (27%) and highest among respondents with a parent or guardian with a visible injury (52%). Respondents with an injured service member (of any type) are 1.4x more likely to report planning to join; this number is largely driven by individuals with a visibly injured service member.



Work

Plans After High School

Most respondents (73%) plan on going to college after graduating high school. Enlisting was the second-most common plan after high school (10%).

Job

Most respondents (49%) do not currently have a job. Of the respondents that do have a job, most work to have money for personal spending (65%) and 16% work to help with family finances.

Recommendations

NMFA is committed to understanding military families. Military service is often a “family business” with multiple generations serving, and as our military teens grow, understanding their relationship with the military community and their intent to serve or not is more important than ever. In recent years, all branches of the military have failed to meet recruitment goals, and recruitment has become a national security concern for our all-volunteer military.

At the same time, military families continue to encourage their children to serve and military teens continue to plan for it. We want to better understand that relationship and how growing up in a military-connected home impacts a teen's decision to serve in uniform, and to do so have partnered with Deloitte to explore propensity, recruitment, and retention.





National Military Family Association

2800 Eisenhower Avenue, Suite 250,
Alexandria, VA 22314
703.931.6632 | MilitaryFamily.org