

Demographics of the U.S. Military

Deployed around the world, the armed forces are a pillar of U.S. power and influence abroad. But many civilians are unfamiliar with their composition. How much does the military resemble U.S. society?

Backgrounder by CFR.org Editors

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Today, women represent 16 percent of the enlisted forces and 19 percent of the officer corps.
Ismael Ortega/U.S. Air Force via Reuters

Introduction

The U.S. military has taken significant steps over the past decade to build a more diverse and inclusive force that attracts the country's top talent. In particular, the services have opened more doors for women in recent years, ending restrictions on combat roles. However, women and racial and ethnic minorities remain underrepresented in parts of the military, particularly at the highest levels of leadership. The military has also opened its ranks to openly gay individuals, but it has maintained broad prohibitions on those who are transgender.

What are the military services?

The organizational structure of the U.S. military is complex. The Department of Defense has three military departments—Army, Navy, and Air Force—but there are six armed services. The Army is organized within its own department, while the navy and Marine Corps both fall under the Department of the Navy, and the Air Force and the newly established Space Force are services within the Department of the Air Force.

The Coast Guard is by law “a military service and a branch of the armed forces” but is part of the Department of Homeland Security. That is because the coast guard is predominately a law enforcement agency, although it does deploy with the navy and marine corps on certain missions.

Collectively, the three maritime forces are sometimes called the sea services.

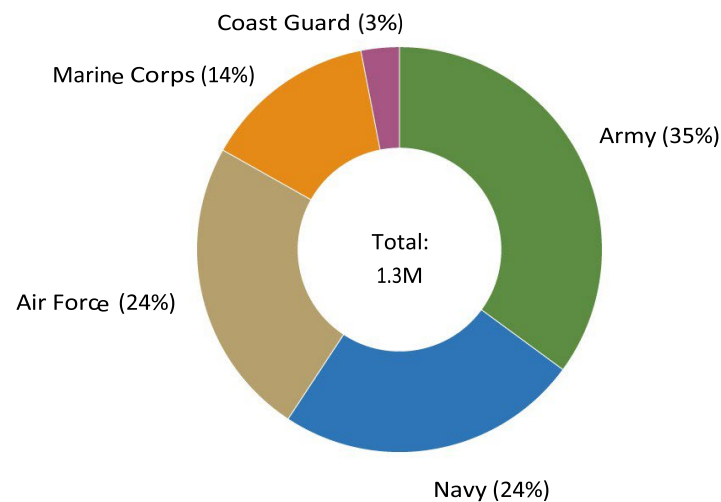
Additionally, there are seven reserve military forces [PDF], which will not be discussed here.

How big are the military services?

The United States ended the draft for military service in 1973, transitioning to the all-volunteer force that exists today. At that time, the active component of the military, excluding the coast guard, comprised 1.9 million men and women, or about 1 percent of the population. Now, there are about 1.3 million active-duty personnel, or less than one-half of 1 percent of the U.S. population.

The army is the largest U.S. military service, followed by the navy, air force, marine corps, and coast guard. The space force became its own branch of the armed services in late 2019 and is still developing.

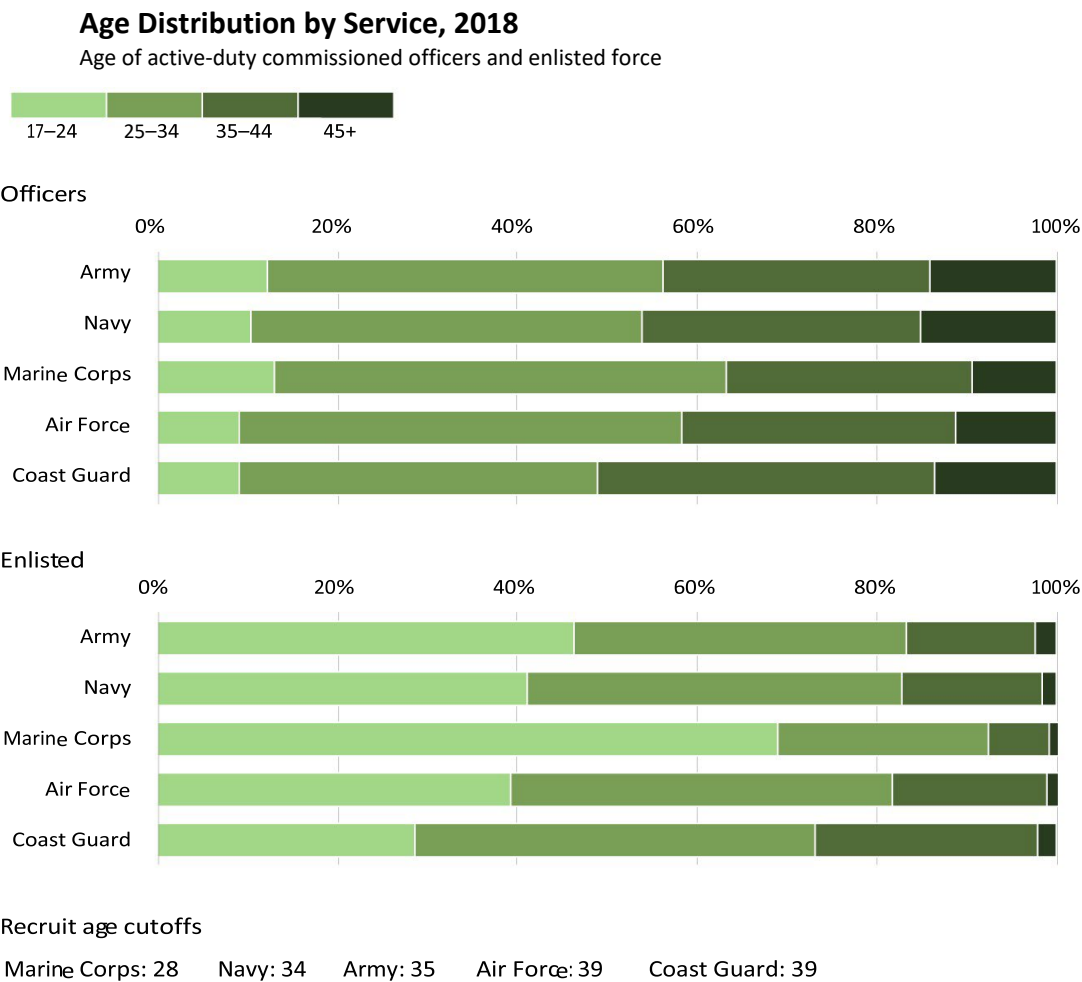
Personnel by Service, 2018



Source: Office of the Undersecretary of Defense.

How old are service members?

The military, which has strict age limits, is younger than the civilian population, but the numbers differ significantly by service. The age ranges of the services vary most on the enlisted side: the coast guard tends to have older members, and marines tend to be younger. About 70 percent of enlisted marines are twenty-four years old or younger, compared with about 30 percent of enlisted coast guard members.

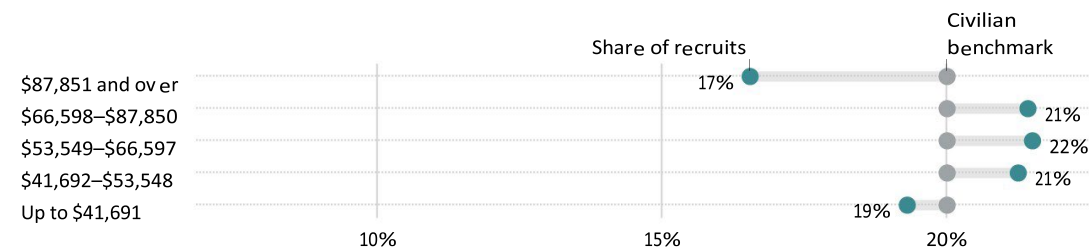


How affluent are enlisted recruits?

Most members of the military come from middle-class neighborhoods. The middle three quintiles for household income were overrepresented among enlisted recruits, and the top and bottom quintiles were underrepresented.

Middle Class Overrepresented Among Recruits

Share of recruits by neighborhood income level



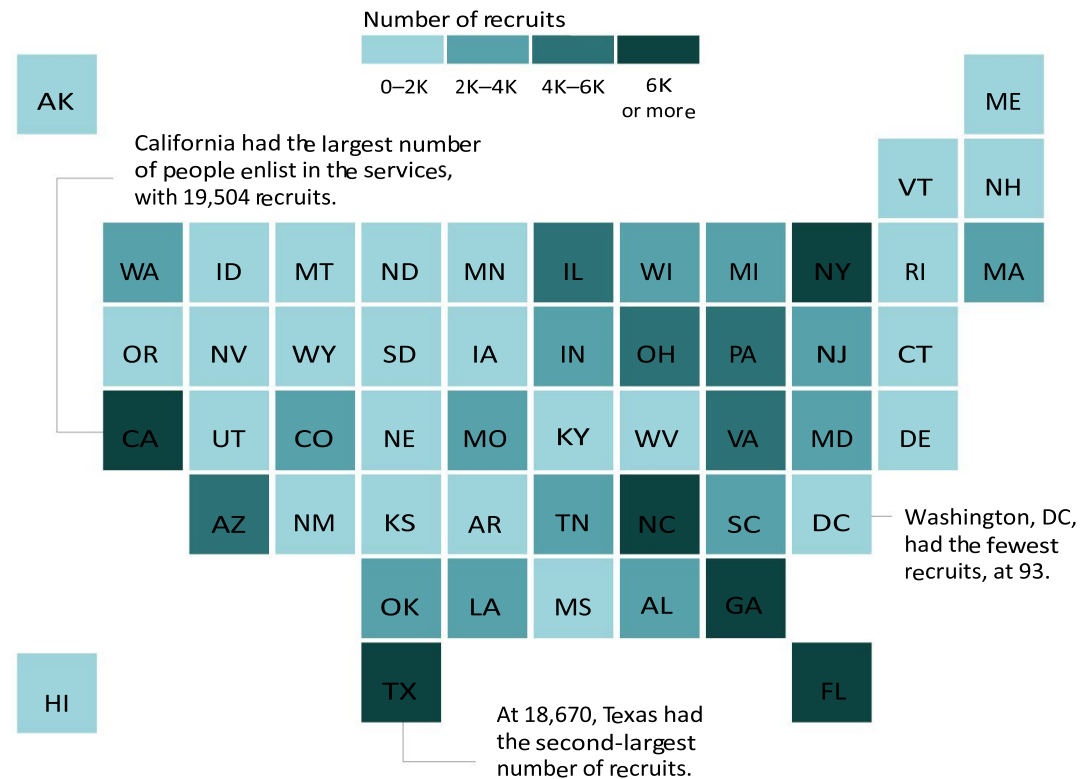
Notes: Income ranges represent the median household income quintiles for all U.S. census tracts. Each quintile includes 20 percent of the U.S. population. Coast Guard data not available.

Source: Office of the Undersecretary of Defense.

Where are enlisted recruits from?

Enlisted military members come from all fifty states and the District of Columbia, but some contribute more than others. In absolute terms, the top five for recruitment in 2018 were California, Texas, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, and New York, which is reflective of their relatively large populations.

Number of Enlisted Recruits, 2018



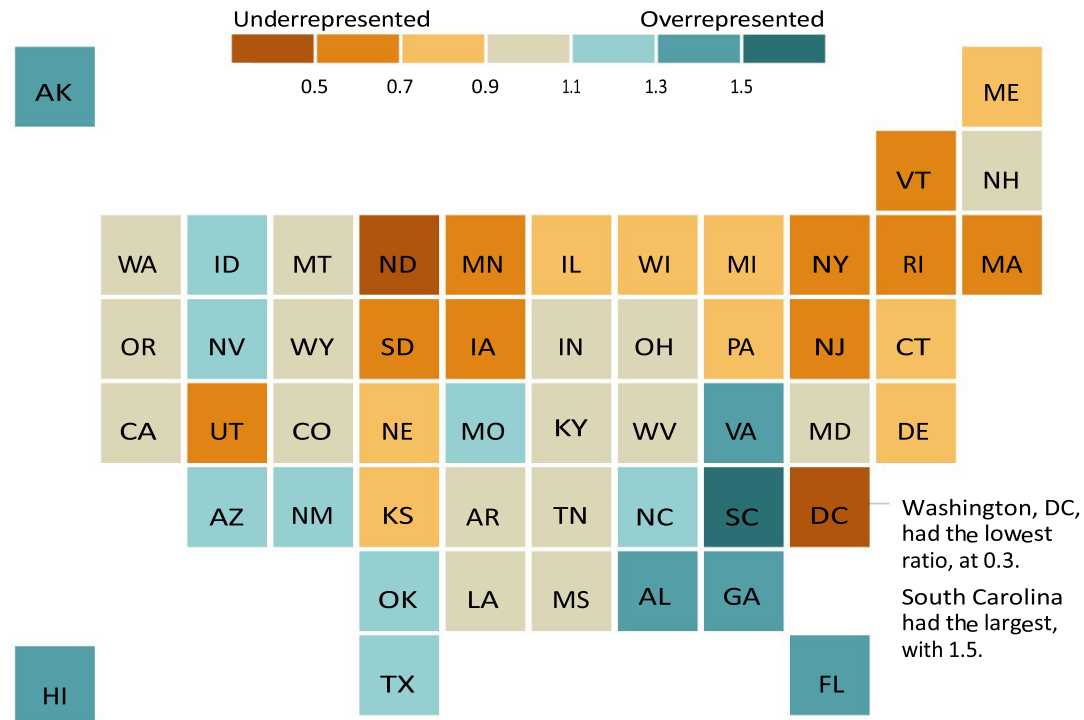
Notes: Coast Guard data not available.

Source: Office of the Undersecretary of Defense.

Another way of analyzing this data is to look at representation ratios, which show recruits as a share of a jurisdiction's residents between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four. From this perspective, the picture is significantly different. A ratio of 1.0 means the jurisdiction's share of recruits in 2018 was equal to its share of eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds.

Representation of States Among Enlisted Recruits, 2018

Ratio of enlisted recruits to civilian 18–24 year olds



Notes: Coast Guard data not available.

Source: Office of the Undersecretary of Defense.

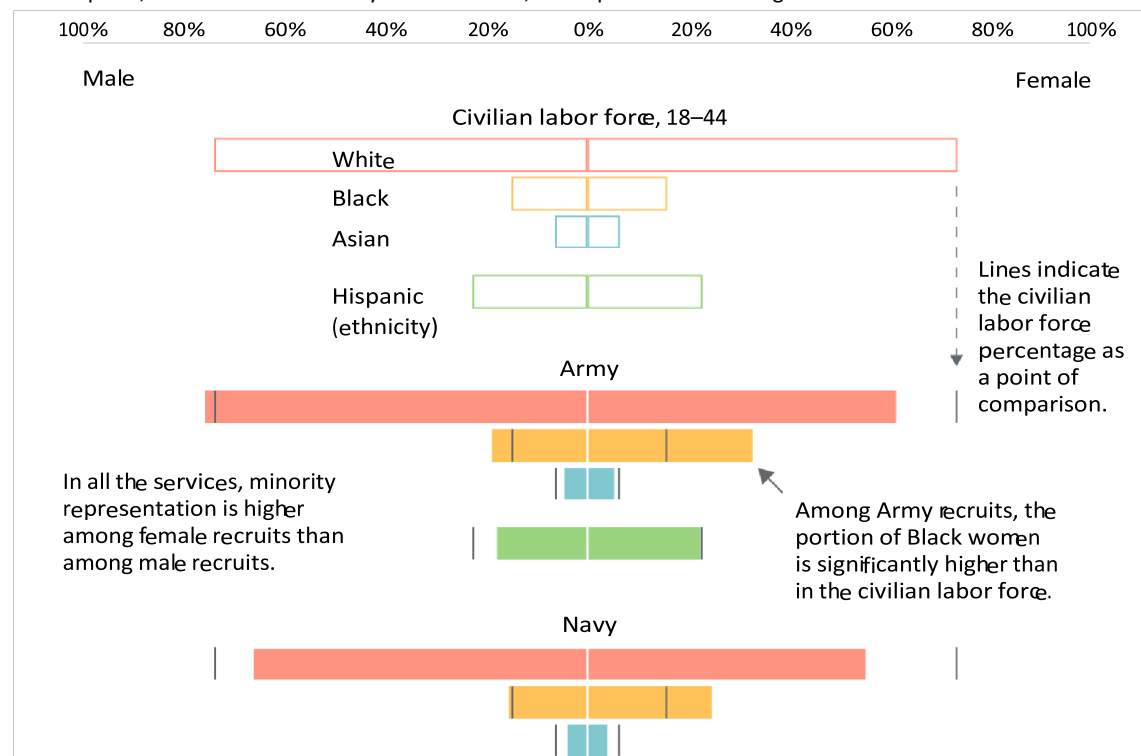
South Carolina had the highest representation ratio, at 1.5, meaning it contributed 50 percent more than its share of the country's eighteen- to twenty-four-year-old population. Florida, Hawaii, Georgia, and Alabama round out the top five. On the other end of the spectrum—jurisdictions that contribute fewer recruits than their share of eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds, or those with ratios less than 1.0—are Washington, DC, North Dakota, Massachusetts, Utah, and Rhode Island.

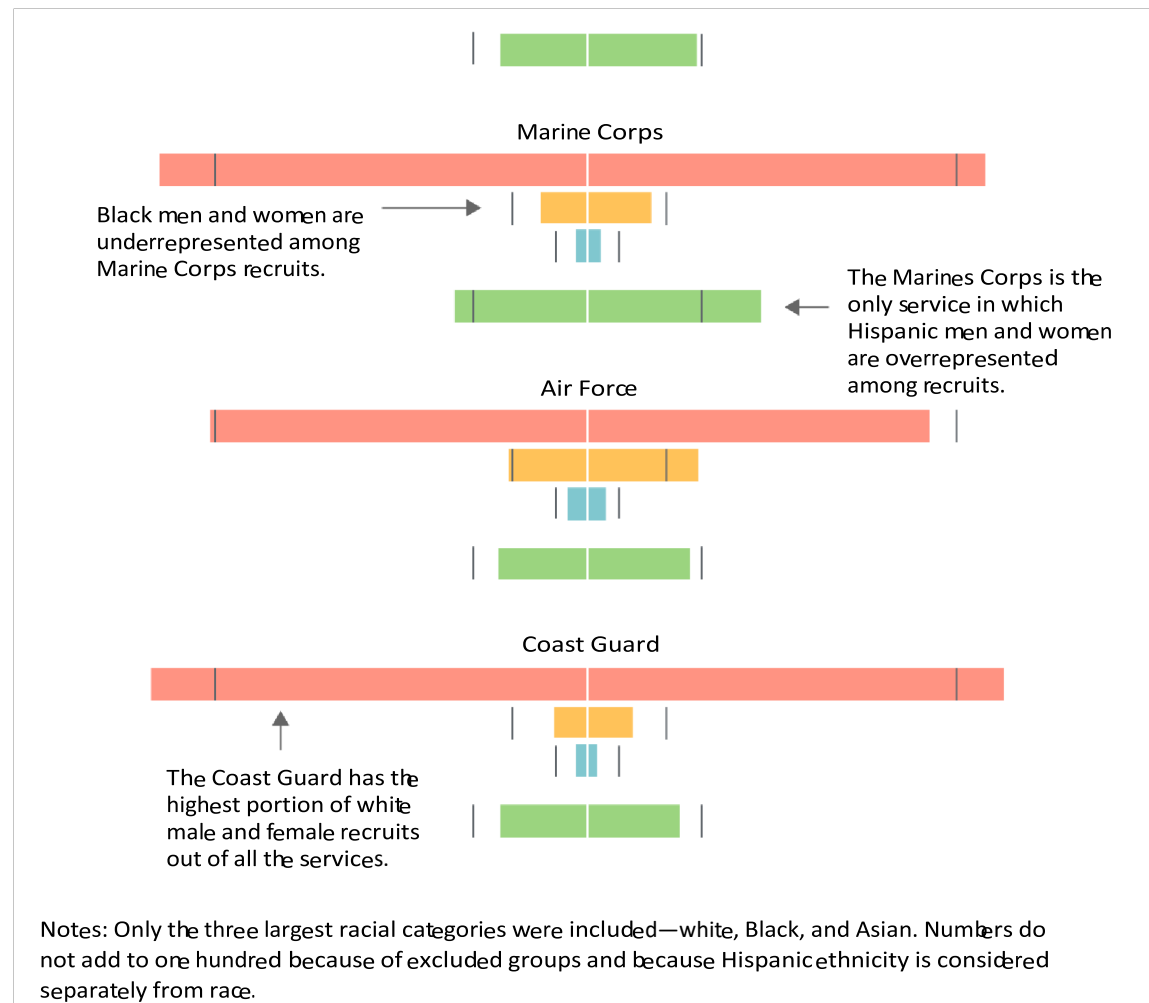
How racially and ethnically diverse is the military?

Federal agencies categorize race into five groups—white, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. Ethnicity, which the government considers distinct from race, is divided into two categories: Hispanic or Latino, and not Hispanic or Latino. The racial and ethnic diversity of enlisted recruits varies considerably across the services and between genders.

Race and Ethnicity of Enlisted Recruits by Service and Gender, 2018

Hispanic, considered an ethnicity and not a race, overlaps with racial categories.

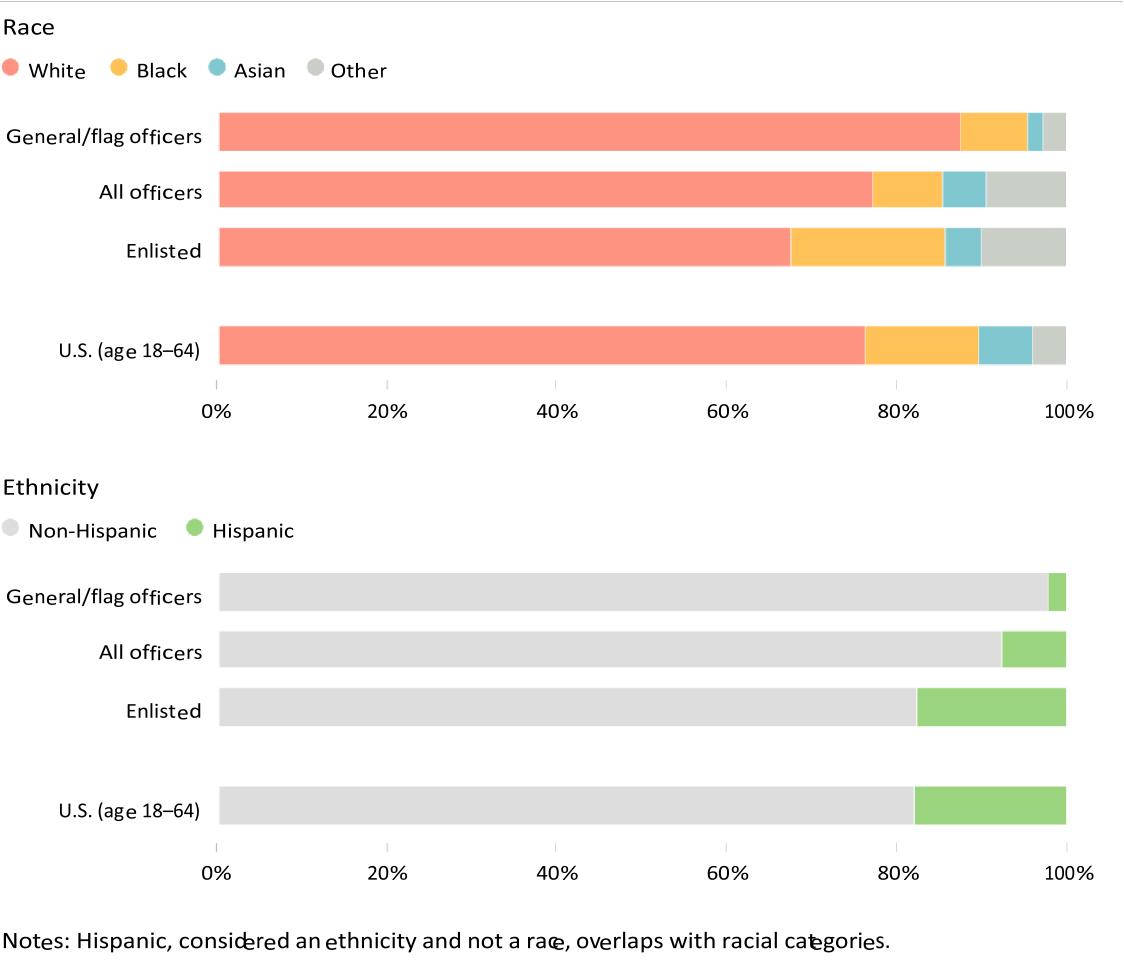




Source: Office of the Undersecretary of Defense.

Racial diversity decreases at the upper echelons of the military. While the officer corps has similar levels of racial diversity as the general population, those with higher ranks—generals in the air force, army, and marine corps, and admirals in the coast guard and navy—are disproportionately white. There is an even greater ethnic disparity in the top ranks.

Race and Ethnicity by Rank, 2018

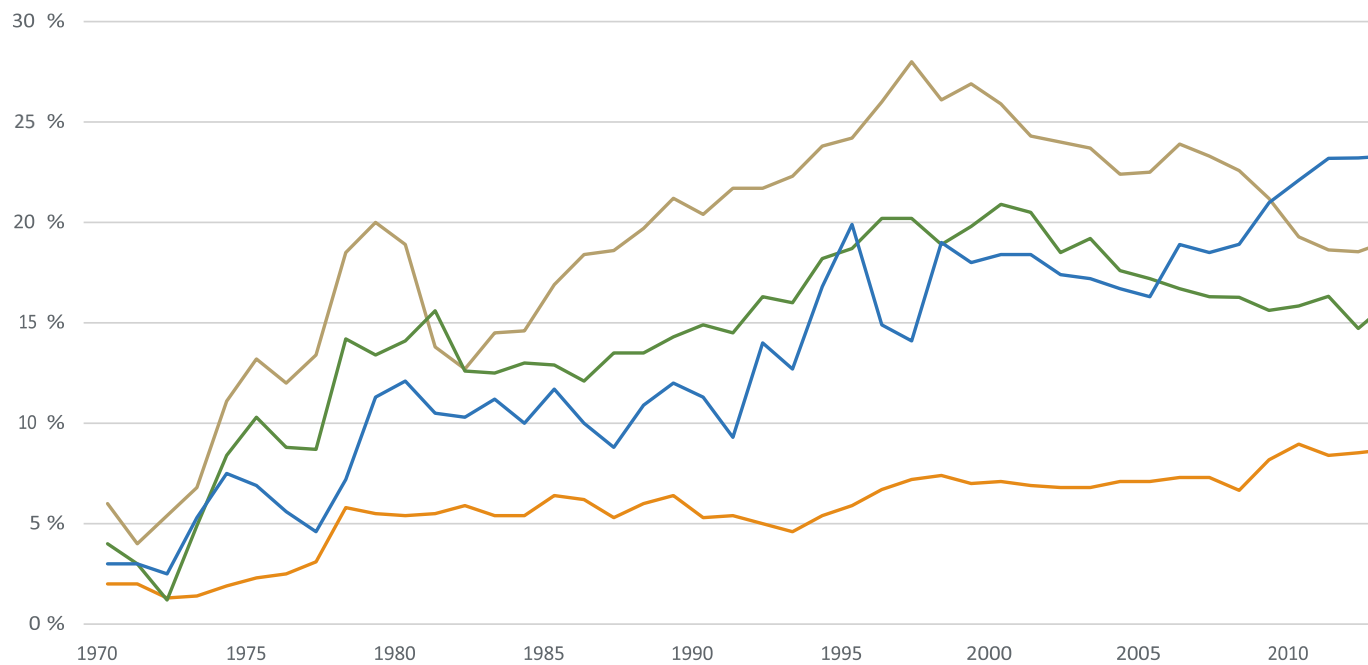


Source: Congressional Research Service.

At what levels are women serving?

When the draft ended in 1973, women represented just 2 percent of the enlisted forces and 8 percent of the officer corps. Today, those numbers are 16 percent and 19 percent, respectively, a significant increase over the past half century.

Percentage of Female Enlisted Recruits, 1970–2018



Note: Coast Guard data not available.

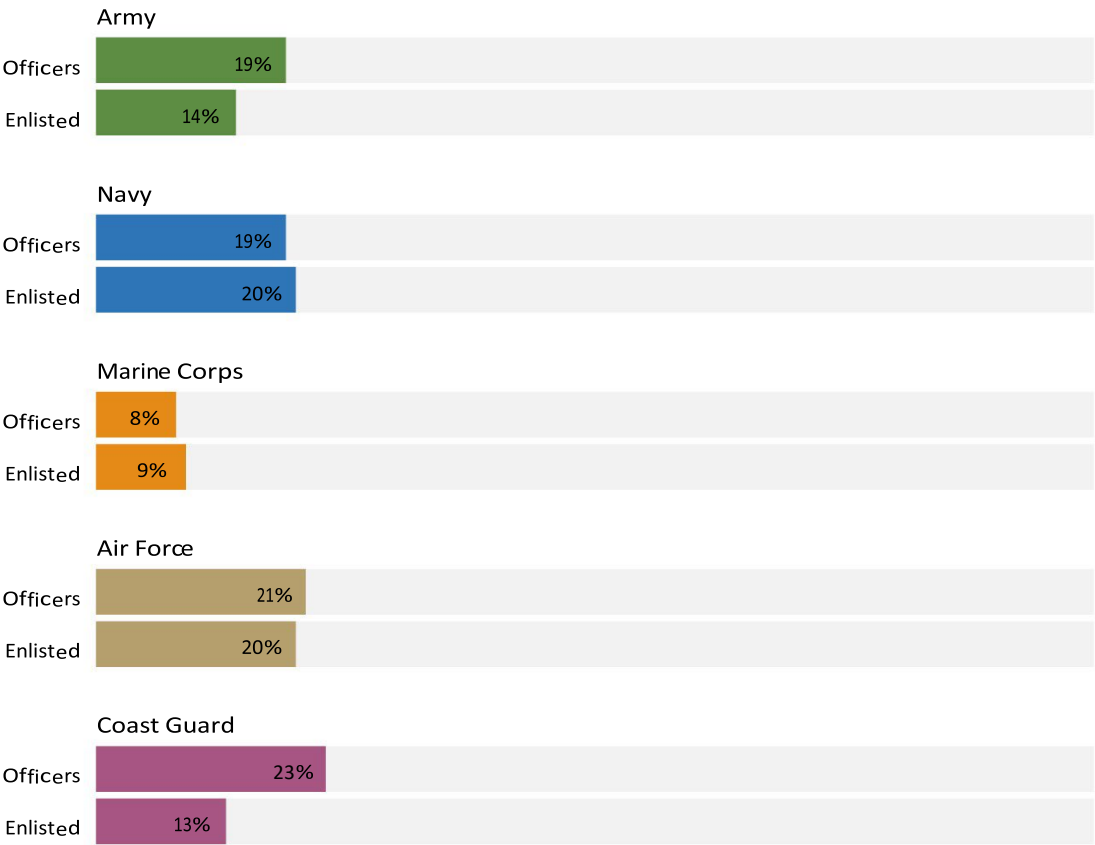
Source: Office of the Undersecretary of Defense.

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Again, the numbers vary widely by service. Women accounted for about one-fifth of the officers in every military service except the marine corps, where they made up just 8 percent of the total. In the army, air force, and coast guard, the ratio of women officers was higher than that for women enlisted.

Women’s Representation by Service and Rank, 2018

Female representation among active-duty commissioned officers and enlisted force



Source: Office of the Undersecretary of Defense.

Do LGBTQ+ individuals serve in the military?

The military does not report data on LGBTQ+ service members.

President Barack Obama’s administration allowed openly gay individuals to serve in the military with its repeal of the “Don’t ask, don’t tell” policy in 2010. Prior to that, gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals could serve but were forced to conceal their sexual orientation.

In 2016, President Obama allowed transgender individuals to also serve openly in the armed forces, but the policy shift was later reversed by President Donald J. Trump. Today, the military does not accept transgender recruits, with few exceptions, but it allows those who entered between the 2016 decision and Trump’s reversal to continue to serve.



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