
Defense Report

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Why Do Young People Enlist in the Army—The Recruiters Seem to Know the Reasons

Have you paid much attention to the ads placed in newspapers and magazines by the Army recruiters? If so you will have noticed their concentration on certain themes as enticements for enlisting. The recruiters didn't just pull those themes out of a hat. They know what "turns on" potential recruits and a recent Army survey has confirmed their judgment.

After questioning more than 4,000 soldiers worldwide the Army confirmed that the four most effective enlistment enticements are educational benefits, learning a skill or trade, opportunities for travel and adventure and the chance to mature and find oneself. These are oft-used themes in recruiting ads and almost two-thirds of the soldiers responding in the survey gave one or more of them as the reason for enlisting.

The survey also provided some interesting insight into reasons for extending the period of service by reenlisting. The most frequent reasons given were more nebulous than those for the first enlistment. Reenlistment was more frequent among those who had enlisted initially for patriotic reasons, had joined "to be a soldier," had a family history of military service or who had specifically benefitted from opportunities encountered in their first enlistment.

Not unexpectedly, the educational entitlements were also cited as a prime reason for not reenlisting. Many of those who accrued this benefit, particularly during the time when full GI Bill entitlements were available, decided not to reenlist so they could go back to school. Recruiters can no longer offer the GI Bill as an inducement since it has been replaced by a plan which requires the service person to pay part of the cost.

There were no surprises among the other reasons given for the decision against reenlisting. Those most frequently cited are as old as armies—long hours, discipline, personal appearance (including haircut policy) and "harassment" by superiors. Many one-term enlistees said they had never had any intention of serving beyond the initial enlistment.

There was remarkably little evidence of disillusionment with promises made by recruiters. Despite periodic reports of soldiers charging "breach of enlistment contract" this problem did not appear to be widespread.

As competition increases for shares of a shrinking population of healthy 18-year-olds the job of the military recruiter will become even more demanding. He will need a keen sense of what appeals to his potential "customers." Appeals to patriotism alone will not get the job done. Volunteer military service must offer today's young people a wide range of reliable incentives that will support the quality of life they seek.