

US Military Short of Recruits with Most Youth Disqualified

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Already in September 2022 the Pentagon was voicing concerns about [ammunition and arsenal shortages](#) while US President Joe Biden was announcing an extra \$3 billion military aid to Ukraine. Things are not so good with its transatlantic allies: in March 2023, Europe's military was described as being in an "appalling state" by a Foreign Affairs [article](#) - a situation which is [hard to escape](#) amid today's [deindustrialization](#).

Last month, the US was announcing it would spend yet another [\\$325 million](#) to replace tanks destroyed by Russia during Ukraine's costly and failed counteroffensive. The hard economic costs and depletion of arsenals, however, should not be Washington's only concern: since 2020, merely [23%](#) of young Americans (aged 17-24) are "eligible for military service without a waiver" and most ineligible youth are disqualified "for multiple reasons", such as overweight, poor medical health, and drug abuse.

In their Atlantic [piece](#), Former US Army Officer Jason Dempsey (an adjunct senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security) and former US Marine officer Gil Barndollar (a senior fellow at Defense Priorities) paint a very worrisome picture, from an American point of view. The 50-year old "all-volunteer force" (AVF), as the US military has come to be known after its last draftee in 1973, they write, has become "unsustainable", facing threats in "three fronts" - namely cost, capacity, and, more importantly, "continued ability to find enough Americans willing and able to serve."

Military pay and benefits have skyrocketed since 9/11, actually rising by more than 50 percent. Its high cost is one of the factors that make the US military small. When faced with medium-sized campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, it already found it challenging to provide just enough troops. Thus, Dempsey and Barndollar argue it could be broken by any "major conflict". For example, they write, just over the past year of confrontation, Russia and Ukraine both have had casualties that are equal to at least half the active-duty U.S. Army,

and current US [military doctrine](#) says that a force is destroyed after taking 30 percent casualties. In other words, the US itself could not endure what its ally Ukraine does.

In any case, [merely 9 percent](#) of young US citizens would seriously consider military service, a figure which is near the all-time low since the so-called All-Volunteer Force began. To broaden the recruiting pool, service branches loosened their restrictions on things such as neck tattoos and other standards. In June last year, the US Army went so far as to briefly drop its requirement for a high school diploma. Even so, the US military simply can't seem to find recruits and keeps falling short of its enlistment quotas.

The AVF crisis is part of a larger societal crisis, even civilizational. Consider this fact: US citizens are currently enduring its worst drug crisis ever, fueled by epidemic opioid abuse. According to Council on Foreign Relations deputy editor Claire Klobucista and expert Alejandra Martinez, this state of affairs endangers the US "public health, economic output, and national security." Opioid drugs (both legally manufactured medications and illicit narcotics) already are by far the leading cause of fatal overdoses in the country.

Or consider this: right now, the US Subcommittee on Health Care and Financial Services says that the Food and Drug Administration agency (FDA) is still dodging oversight and failing to provide answers regarding an ongoing baby formula shortage crisis. There is more: even though it is supposedly the world's richest nation, the US healthcare system is [collapsing](#), with hospitals closing down, overcrowded and understaffed facilities, and lack of items such as ICU beds. The country is also facing a [mental health crisis](#), with 40% of parents reporting their children struggle with anxiety or depression, among other issues.

Given all these domestic and systemic issues, it is no wonder that most youth either do not qualify or do not want to be part of the military. Considering that many young people, due to so many factors, simply do not qualify for service, bringing back the draftee (with all the political costs) would simply not solve the issue. This is one of the reasons why the US increasingly needs to fight proxy wars.

In November 2022, while [addressing](#) the Naval Submarine League's annual gathering in Arlington, Virginia, US Navy Admiral Charles Richard, then head of US Strategic Command had this to say about the Ukraine crisis: "this is just the warmup. The big one is coming." He added: "It isn't going to be very long before we're going to get tested in ways that we haven't been tested a long time." At the time he urged policy makers and Pentagon chiefs to return to the 1950s and 1960s dynamism in order to face such challenges.

Those are bold and ambitious calls for a declining, [overburdened](#) and [overextended](#) superpower which is actively pursuing a [dual containment](#) policy targeting both Russia and China simultaneously. In addition, it aims to maintain its [naval hegemony](#) as a sea power while also engaging in land wars as part of a Mackinder-like struggle for the Heartland. Like the meme-famous pelican, it seems to want it all. However, appetite and capacity are not to be confused. It remains to be seen whether or not American society will continue to have what it takes for all that and just for how long. Right now, the prospect is not looking good.

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