

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 1561
July 20, 2007

CBO Weighs In on the All-Volunteer Force

Tim Kane, Ph.D.

The Congressional Budget Office has released a major study¹ of the U.S. military's demographics under an all-volunteer framework versus the draft. The idea of reinstating the draft was a hot-button issue last November when Congressman Charlie Rangel (D-NY), a leader and committee chairman in the newly elected Democratic majority, vocalized his intent to once again make conscription the law of land. Called on by Congress to assess the matter, CBO offered new findings, which dispassionately deflate the notion that America's All-Volunteer Force (AVF) is inferior to a conscripted force by any measure: effectiveness, cost, troop quality, retention, morale, and even social fairness.

Rising Levels of Concern. Last autumn, Senator John Kerry (D-MA) commented to college students in California that without doing your homework, "you get stuck in Iraq." It created a media circus, with Senator Kerry getting blame for what has in reality been a long-standing belief that military enlistees are a lower quality group than the civilian population, though often couched in softer socio-economic terms. Five years ago, Representative Rangel wrote that a "disproportionate number of the poor and members of minority groups make up the enlisted ranks of the military." The stereotype was given another boost by Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*. One notorious scene tracked Marine recruiters, with Moore's overtone: "Where would [the military] find the new recruits? They would find them all across America in the places that had been destroyed by the economy. Places where one of the only jobs available was to join the Army." The ste-

reotype entered the mainstream in a front-page Washington Post article on November 4, 2005: "[T]he military is leaning heavily for recruits on economically depressed, rural areas."²

To its great credit, the CBO takes on this challenge with its exhaustive report, "The All-Volunteer Military: Issues and Performance." The CBO aims to address three main concerns in light of prolonged combat in Iraq and Afghanistan: "that not enough troops will be available to accomplish the military's missions; that service members and their families are experiencing continued, significant hardships not shared by the rest of the U.S. population; and that less-affluent people are more likely to be serving..."

The study provides excellent, fact-filled coverage of the first two concerns, which many military professionals share. Regarding the third concern, CBO shows the stereotype of less-affluent enlistees to be lacking in substance. In sum, it firmly supports the findings of multiple studies by The Heritage Foundation³ and lands strongly in support of policymakers that want to preserve the AVF.

The CBO's Findings. Volunteer service members have a lower turnover rate and higher morale; this has implications for cost reduction. The CBO notes

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/wm1561.cfm

Produced by the Center for International
Trade and Economics (CITE)

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

that the only way to reduce costs with involuntary conscripts is to reduce pay. Volunteers normally sign up for four- to six-year enlistments, versus the two-year conscriptions allowed by the Selective Service Act. The continuation rate of today's enlisted troops has varied between 82.4 to 84.5 percent in recent years, and the CBO estimates that an annual crop of up to 90,000 new Army volunteers—10,000 more than current goals—may be necessary to expand the overall force by 2012 as planned. If a draft is used as an alternative to grow the force, nine out of 10 draftees are likely to leave after their initial two-year enlistment. A draft involves new expenses as well, not to mention consequences for quality. The high turnover rate would also severely disrupt U.S. goals to grow long-term capabilities, which starts with a stable force structure.

Data-rich charts in the CBO study shine light on the quality of recruits: (1) Non-prior-service (NPS) recruits with high school diplomas rose from under 70 percent in 1973 to above 90 percent in every year after 1985; and (2) the percentage of enlistees in the lowest two intelligence test categories is roughly one-tenth in the AVF what it is in the civilian population, and is one-seventh what it was in the draft-era enlisted force. These are consistent with the educational findings in reports from The Heritage Foundation.

Spicing the Numbers. Despite the wide agreement between the studies, the CBO takes pains to say that another study by the National Priorities Project (NPP) is “consistent” with its own, even though NPP was one of the originators of the low-income stereotype. The CBO report then goes out of its way to disagree with Heritage, concluding not with a refutation of the stereotype that motivated its study, but with the following statement: “Neither of

the [CBO or NPP] studies is consistent with the Heritage Foundation’s conclusion that recruits come disproportionately from the top 40 percent of the income distribution.”

This is an odd note that is off-key with the substantive message in the other 48 pages. The data from all three studies are quite similar, showing that in the modern military, the poorest and wealthiest youth populations are underrepresented while the middle-class is overrepresented.⁴ As a matter of fact, the CBO even shows that recruits with parents in the wealthy 75th–90th percentile range are overrepresented. Where the studies differ is how they cut the data and spice it up. CBO, to its credit, has no spice, which makes its final sentence all the more puzzling.

NPP, in contrast, is heavily spiced. “Lower and middle-income communities experience higher military enlistment rates than higher income areas,” declared NPP’s original November 2005 study. This is demonstrably false, using NPP’s own data and charts. Greg Speeter, NPP’s Executive Director, said, “this data makes clear that low- and middle-income kids are paying the highest price.” Even now, the NPP Web site says, “In other words, neighborhoods with low- to middle-median household incomes are over-represented.” This claim is stunning in its boldness, appearing directly above a chart showing that the poorest income bracket has an enlistment rate roughly one-third the national norm.

Turning now to Heritage, the second chart in its 2006 report shows the percentage point difference between the median incomes of recruits’ “home of record” neighborhoods and the equivalent civilians in 20 income brackets up to \$100,000+. The chart shows a clear bubble of over-representation from middle-class neighborhoods while the tail ends of the graph are underrepresented. But the wealthy tail

1. Congressional Budget Office, “The All-Volunteer Military: Issues and Performance,” Pub. No. 2960, July 2007, www.cbo.gov/ftpdocs/83xx/doc8313/07-19-MilitaryVol.pdf (July 19, 2007).
2. Ann Scott Tyson, “Youths in Rural U.S. Are Drawn to Military,” *The Washington Post*, November 4, 2005, p. A1.
3. Tim Kane, “Who Are the Recruits? The Demographics of U.S. Military Enlistment, 2003–2005,” Center for Data Analysis Report #06-09, The Heritage Foundation, October 27, 2006, at www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/cda06-09.cfm.
4. See National Priorities Project, “Army recruits by neighborhood income, 2004, 2005, 2006,” December 22, 2006, at www.nationalpriorities.org/charts/Army-recruits-by-neighborhood-income-2004-2005-2006.html, and The Heritage Foundation, “Income Difference Between Wartime Recruits and Civilians,” at www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/images/chart2_large.gif.

is very lightly populated, which is why Heritage emphasizes population quintiles instead. Heritage cut the data so that each income class, from poorest to richest, was based on the same population size.

The Heritage report is careful to discuss the over-represented recruits coming from wealthier neighborhoods, not families. This fact is indisputable and the CBO does not try to counter it. Rather, its point is that zip code analysis of the kind that Heritage and NPP undertake is only tentative.

The alternative is to get a broad sample of enlistees to identify their actual parental incomes, and this is what the CBO attempts to do. The results are based on a sample of “just over 100 people,” which is arguably more tentative and subject to a wide margin of error, especially when broken into income brackets.

The Heritage study did not use such a tiny sample, or any sample for that matter, but the entire population of NPS enlistees: “The 2003 data cover

176,410 recruits, the 2004 data cover 175,977 recruits, and the 2005 data cover 149,462 recruits.” One way to think about the statistical validity is the following: a single 5-digit zip code in Heritage’s study included more enlistees than CBO’s entire analysis of socioeconomic fairness.

Conclusion. All in all, the CBO deserves praise for its excellent study. It confirms that today’s American troops are not disadvantaged victims, no matter how the data is sliced. They are smart, competent, and have a host of opportunities. Despite the opportunities available to intelligent young Americans, hundreds of thousands are making a free choice to join the ranks every year. Thanks to the CBO, Congress is more likely to agree that these men and women should not be replaced by conscripts.

Tim Kane, Ph.D., is Director for the Center for International Trade and Economics at The Heritage Foundation.