



RESEARCH SUMMARY

Barriers to Minority and Female Participation in Elite Military Specialties

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 required the Department of Defense to sponsor an assessment of barriers to underrepresented groups' participation in Special Operations Forces, in Marine Corps Force Reconnaissance, in Coast Guard Maritime Security Response Teams, and as aircraft pilots and navigators.

The Office of the Secretary of Defense asked the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA) to conduct this study. IDA researchers Dina Eliezer, Jordan Marcusse and Ashlie Williams were part of the team that examined participation in these elite units and specialties. A quantitative analysis of participation by race/ethnicity and gender pointed to underrepresentation of racial/ethnic minority groups and women in these specialties relative to their proportion in the overall military population.

To understand barriers to participation, IDA conducted focus groups with 340 men and women from majority and minority racial/ethnic groups in a range of Army, Navy, Marine Corps,

Air Force and Coast Guard careers. IDA found that awareness of the elite units and specialties examined was low among participants not serving in those positions. Participants noted that media depictions may not appeal to women and racial/ethnic minority groups because they fail to meaningfully depict diversity or transferability of career skills. Personnel trying to join the examined specialties while in service can be deterred in various ways. For example, they may lack support from their current leadership to

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transfer, be concerned about career repercussions for not being selected, or have insufficient time and knowledge to complete administrative requirements to apply.

Service members that make it to assessment and selection followed by training for the specialties IDA examined face grueling mental and physical challenges. Prior preparation, including physical training and practicing strategies for managing stress and for tolerating discomfort, can help candidates succeed. However, even the strongest candidates are susceptible to injury, and many participants believed that women are more susceptible than men.

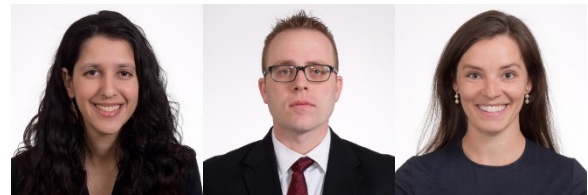
Upon joining the examined units/specialties, service members described a range of challenges, including frequent deployments, high operating tempo, and demanding work that make managing family life difficult. Many participants spoke positively of command climate, but others felt disrespected because of their identity. Some participants affirmed the value of increasing diversity, while others were skeptical.

IDA also assessed progress on implementing past recommendations specific to special operations forces through stakeholder interviews and literature/document review. The team found that the Department of Defense has made at least partial progress on most past recommendations. IDA identified past recommendations that require further progress, including continued efforts to expand recruitment and outreach to underrepresented groups and to collect data on diversity and command climate. IDA offered additional recommendations for special operations forces and the other units and specialties examined. These recommendations aim to address both general barriers to entry as

well as barriers specific to women and racial/ethnic minorities:

- Incentivize minority participation in outreach, recruiter engagement with diverse groups and informal mentorship.
- Educate and incentivize leaders from originating units to improve support for subordinates who seek to join examined specialties.
- Continue to expand access to training for examined specialties prior to service.
- Increase awareness of and access to commissioning opportunities for enlisted service members seeking to become pilots or navigators.
- Embed guidance related to psychological and cognitive skills in preparatory materials and training.
- Review current physical training, nutrition and injury-prevention strategies for the examined specialties to ensure relevance to women.
- Continue to provide opportunities to add flexibility to military careers and support military families.

This summary is based on [IDA Paper P-33194](#).



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