

Army battles to reverse drop in recruit totals from Midwest

Colonel: Split is growing between America, Army

Holly V. Hays and Crystal Hill

Indianapolis Star USA TODAY NETWORK

Uncle Sam wants young people in the Midwest. But they don't seem to want Uncle Sam.

The U.S. Army, the oldest and largest branch of the nation's military, has a problem that millennials and Generation Z-ers in states such as Indiana and Michigan can help fix: adding more soldiers to its ranks.

In the past several years, recruitment in the region has consistently fallen short of the Army's goals. The repeated failures here have amounted to less diversity in the U.S. Army, in terms of age and location, according to Army officials and experts. And the challenges ahead for recruiters are numerous.

Col. Eric Lopez, of the U.S. Army 3rd Recruiting Brigade, told IndyStar there's a "growing divide between America and its Army."

"So, thanks for your service, right, we got that, but sometimes thanks for what you do, but either I don't want to do that or I don't want my kids to do that," he said.

Data provided to IndyStar by the 3rd Recruiting Brigade, which covers Chicago, Cleveland, Columbus, Indianapolis, Great Lakes, Milwaukee, Minneapolis and Nashville, shows that since 2012, the brigade has not met its recruiting mission in those areas. Recently, the Army's 3rd Recruiting Brigade missed the mark by more than 3,000 in fiscal year 2018.

Waning interest in the Midwest has contributed to disproportionate numbers in the country.

"The Army is becoming increasingly Southern," he said during an interview with IndyStar. "We're not getting the regional diversity that we want in the Army. We're (also) becoming more rural, so we're losing the urban centers of the Northeast and the Midwest, just like here in Indianapolis."

The presence of Army bases in states such as Texas and California affords the Army more ubiquity in those areas, producing more recruits, according to Lopez. "Places like Indianapolis, Milwaukee, there's not a big Army base or a big military base where people can look and see and connect and go, 'OK that's what the military's all about,' " he said.

People who live in an area where there's an active Army presence may be more inclined to serve "because they see it," Lopez said.

But for potential recruits, showing interest isn't enough. Only 29 percent of young Americans qualify for the service, according to Lopez.

"You go to any high school class in America, only 1 in 3 can get in. That's either because of educational stuff, physical fitness, medical reasons, criminal reasons," he said.

Emma Moore, a research assistant in the Military, Veterans and Security Program at the Center for a New American Security, told IndyStar there are a number of factors contributing to the Army's struggles, including a drawdown that began earlier this year after the U.S. declared victory over ISIS in Iraq.

That the country has been embroiled in conflict for nearly two decades affects the attitudes of young people toward the service.

"It's also 17 years of war," Moore said. "This kind of background noise of lack of conclusivity in Afghanistan and Iraq that kind of indicates, like, 'What is the point of your service; what good does it contribute to the world?'" Recruiting that resonates with millennials and Generation Z-ers has been lacking, as the Army has increased its recruiters but relied on outdated methods, such as going door to door, Moore said.

"They're hitting the sidewalk, and in our digitized world, that's really insufficient," she said.

How is the Army combating these challenges? One way is through a medium young people have long embraced: social media. Recruiters are spreading their message on social media sites such as Instagram and Facebook.

"I post on Instagram almost every single day," Lopez said. "It's funny, Generation Z and millennials live on social media, and in the past, we did not do a good job of connecting with them where they're at."

Lopez said he believes the outreach through social media, and e-gaming, are having a positive impact.

"We've been making huge leaps with social media and virtual," he said.

Another method is cultivating a strong presence in communities. Lopez said recruiters are coaches, tutors, mentors, figures who young people can respect and look up to.

In Indianapolis, the work has paid off. The battalion was No. 1 in the brigade for fiscal year 2018, out of eight battalions, and it's on pace to make its mission for the next fiscal year.

Fledgling numbers in the region don't mean the Army is lowering its goals – or its standards. The contract mission for the current fiscal year is almost 100,000, including Army Reserve, according to Lopez.

Successful Army recruitment that yields a high number of qualified, diverse candidates benefits the nation, according to Lopez.

"When there's wildfires in Colorado and California, they call the Army. When Ebola strikes in Africa, who do they go to? They go to the Army. Hurricanes in Florida and in the South, they ask the army to do it," Lopez said.

"So, it's not just the combat side, but there's so much more that our country asks us to do, and we want that diverse base that can think and solve problems together as a team but think about it in all different ways."

Call IndyStar reporter Holly Hays at 317-444-6156. Follow her on Twitter: @hollyvhays.

Call IndyStar reporter Crystal Hill at 317-444-6094. Follow her on Twitter: @crysnhill.