

Non-Citizens in the Enlisted U.S. Military: Executive Summary

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Photo credit line: Lance Cpl. Tomas Roginski was one of several Marines, Sailors, Airmen, Coast Guardsmen, and Soldiers to join a group of 125 immigrants receiving their citizenship on Liberty Island, N.Y., Oct. 28, 2011. Roginski immigrated to Brooklyn from Poland when he was a child and serves in the Marine Corps with 6th Communication Battalion. He is pursuing a degree in electrical engineering from the College of Staten Island. (Marine Corps production by Sgt Randall A. Clinton.)

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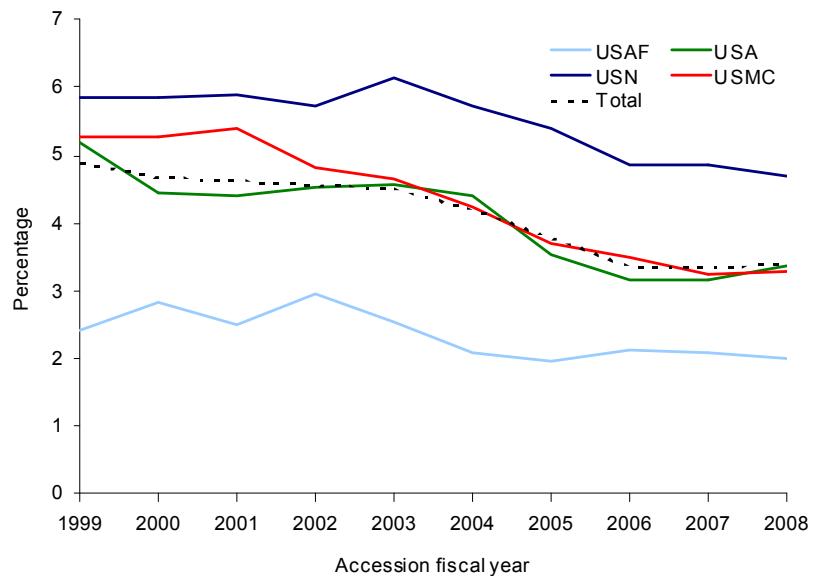
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Although non-citizens make up a large and growing part of the U.S. population, they make up a relatively small share of enlisted accessions into the U.S. armed forces (see figure 1). In fiscal year 2008, non-citizens constituted 5 percent of Navy (USN) accessions, 3 percent each of Army (USA) and Marine Corps (USMC) accessions, and 2 percent of Air Force (USAF) accessions.

Figure 1. Non-citizen share of enlisted accessions by service and accession fiscal year



Only a small number of non-citizens join the service each year, but they are a potentially valuable resource for recruitment. We find that a large number of non-citizens in the United States not only are eligible for military service but also possess language skills that are of strategic interest to the military. Perhaps most important, during the first enlistment term, non-citizens who join the military tend to "attrite," or leave the military before completing their contracts, at lower rates than their U.S. citizen counterparts.

The non-citizen recruitable population

Using data from two Census Bureau surveys, the 2006-2009 American Community Survey and the March 2010 Current Population Survey, we examined the size and characteristics of the U.S. non-citizen recruitable population. We define this population as legal permanent residents of the United States (i.e., green card holders) between the ages of 18 and 29 who have at least a high school degree and speak English well.¹

Based on our analysis of these data, we found the following:

- About 1.2 million non-citizens living in the United States are eligible for military service based on their resident status, age, education, and English language ability. About half of this population is male.
- A sizable share of the recruitable U.S. non-citizen population comes from diverse backgrounds and possesses language skills that are of strategic interest to the U.S. military.

As figures 2 and 3 show, just over half of recruitable non-citizens come from the Americas. After that, the largest region of origin is Asia (excluding South Asia), followed by Europe, India and Pakistan, Africa, and the Middle East. In addition, although Spanish is the most common foreign language spoken in the homes of recruitable non-citizens, other European and Asian languages also are frequently spoken at home.

Non-citizen recruits: First-term attrition

We examined Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC) data on enlisted accessions (i.e., new recruits) who joined the military between fiscal year 1999 and fiscal year 2008. Using DMDC quarterly snapshots, we followed these enlistees through June 2010 and found that non-citizen recruits are far more likely to remain in the military through their first terms of enlistment than recruits who are U.S. cit-

1. The American Community Survey asks how well survey participants speak English; response choices include "very well" and "well." In our analysis, we combine these groups to define our population that speaks English well.

Figure 2. Region of origin of recruitable non-citizens

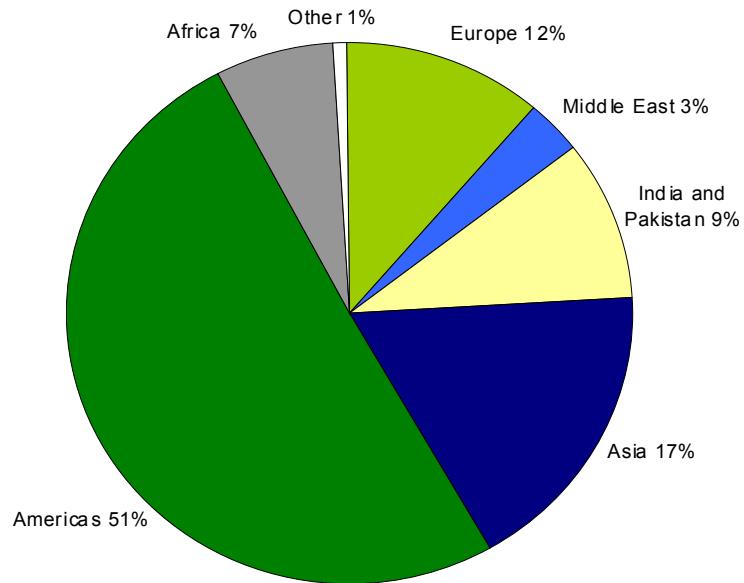
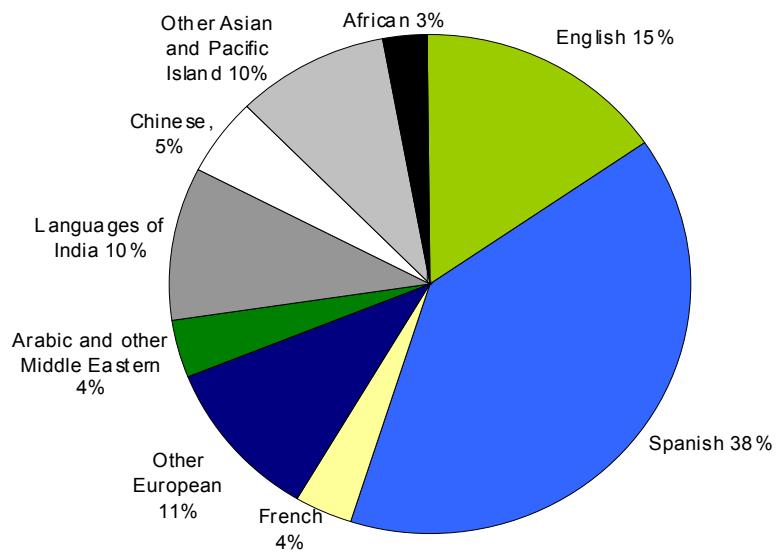


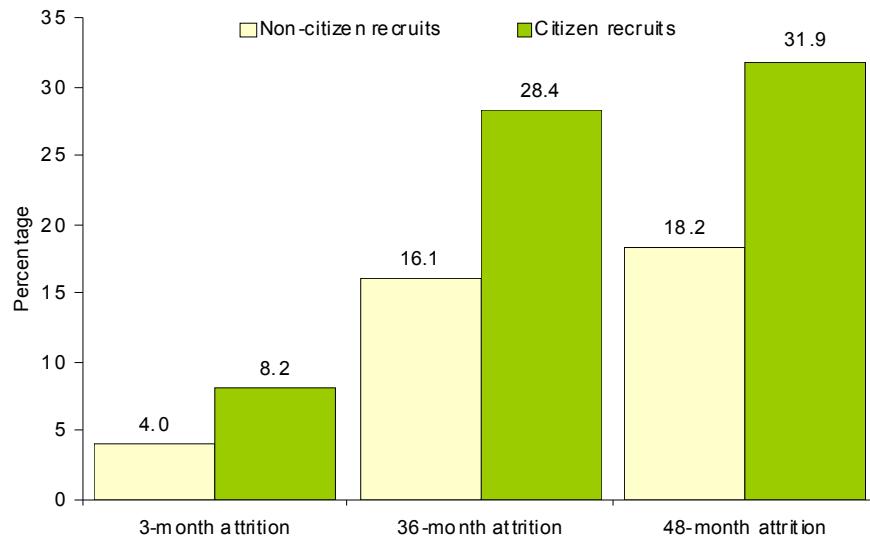
Figure 3. Language spoken at home among recruitable non-citizens



izens. Indeed, when we combined the data from all four military services (as shown in figure 4), we found that non-citizens attrite at lower rates at three points in the first term: 3 months after accession (corresponding roughly to the end of basic training), and 36 and 48 months after accession (corresponding to the end of the first enlistment contracts for most new recruits).

These differences persist even after taking into consideration other factors that can affect first-term attrition, including demographics (i.e., age, education, race, ethnicity, gender, and marital status) and service-related characteristics (i.e., Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT) score, date of enlistment, and service branch).

Figure 4. Attrition rates for non-citizens and citizens at 3, 36, and 48 months, all services



Non-citizen recruits: Citizenship attainment

- Non-citizen recruits in the Air Force are more likely than non-citizens in the other services to become citizens. Citizenship attainment is more likely in the Air Force because the Air Force

does not allow non-citizens to serve more than one term of enlistment unless they become citizens.

- Non-citizens who are minorities,² female, better educated, or married and non-citizens who have dependents or who score higher on the AFQT are more likely to become citizens.
- Time-to-citizenship is longer for minority non-citizens but shorter for non-citizens who are better educated or have higher AFQT scores.
- In the years following President George W. Bush's July 2002 executive order that reduced the waiting period for non-citizen servicemembers to apply for citizenship from three years to one day of honorable active-duty service, non-citizens in the Marine Corps have had the longest average time-to-citizenship, followed by the Navy, the Air Force, and the Army.

Policy implications

Our analysis revealed several policy implications for military recruiting and for decision-makers at the Department of Defense (DOD) and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS).

The services should develop strategies to recruit non-citizens more effectively. In the near term, as the U.S. economy improves, the military will enter a more difficult recruiting environment. This difficulty is compounded by recent estimates from the National Center for Health Statistics that show a decline in fertility rates accompanying the recession, which will affect the size of the future recruitable population. Looking a couple of decades down the road, therefore, the only source of net growth in the U.S. recruiting-age population is projected to be immigration (i.e., immigrants and their U.S.-born children).

This immigrant population is particularly important because our data show that:

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2. For purposes of this study, we define minority as a person who is of minority racial or ethnic descent (e.g., a person who is not white or who is Hispanic).

- non-citizens attrite at far lower rates than their citizen counterparts during their first term in the military; and
- non-citizens represent a more diverse group of recruits—not only in terms of racial, ethnic, and gender diversity but also in terms of language and cultural skills that are of strategic interest to the U.S. military.

Therefore, even in a favorable recruiting environment, recruiters should be encouraged to continue to make the extra effort required to process the paperwork needed to access non-citizen recruits.

To address public concerns about security, particularly if the military were to begin recruiting non-citizens in large numbers, DOD has moved to reexamine its screening procedures for non-citizen recruits. DOD has placed on hold a pilot program, Military Accessions Vital to the National Interest (MAVNI), that allows the military services to recruit non-citizens who do not have a green card but who possess skills that "are considered to be vital to the national interest," according to DOD's description of the program. Those skills include medical training and language expertise. The protocols that emerge as DOD revises MAVNI may lay the groundwork for enhanced security screenings for all non-citizen recruits.

Basic training naturalization programs should continue to be supported by DOD and USCIS, and the Marine Corps (the only service currently lacking such a program) should continue to investigate the possibility of starting its own program. The Army, Navy, and Air Force basic training naturalization program prototypes, whereby non-citizen recruits seeking citizenship are naturalized before finishing basic training, have demonstrated that there is a quick and efficient way to naturalize large groups of non-citizen recruits. In these programs, USCIS provides onsite assistance to non-citizen recruits who want to be naturalized, streamlining the process so that naturalization interviews, fingerprinting, and exams all occur in a central location.

The Army's and Navy's experiences with naturalizing at basic training suggest that it is crucial to have recruiters involved in disseminating citizenship information and paperwork to non-citizen recruits to optimize the efficiency and efficacy of basic training naturalizations.

Note that, as spelled out in the executive order, basic training naturalization programs will not be needed once the United States is no longer engaged in the Global War on Terror. At that point, unless policies governing the naturalization of non-citizen servicemembers are changed yet again, the waiting period for servicemembers seeking citizenship will revert back to one year. Since the date for this change is still undetermined, however, we think it is worthwhile for the Marine Corps to explore the feasibility of naturalizing at basic training.

DOD and USCIS both would benefit from sharing administrative data. If USCIS notified DOD when servicemembers' citizenship applications were approved, DOD would have more accurate information on citizenship attainment and time-to-citizenship. Currently, DOD can only estimate time-to-citizenship based on changes in citizenship status in servicemembers' personnel files. Similarly, if DOD had a mechanism by which to notify USCIS when servicemembers attrite from the military, USCIS would have a better sense of whether basic training naturalization programs are working as intended.

Future areas of study

Although our study provided us with sufficient data to make several policy recommendations that officials can implement now, a few areas bear further exploration.

First, we could examine whether certain observable characteristics are more closely associated with lower first-term attrition among non-citizen recruits than other characteristics. If this is the case, the services would be able to determine which non-citizen recruits are particularly likely to remain in the service through the end of the first term and, therefore, should be a special focus for enlisted recruiting. It also would be worthwhile to explore whether certain observable characteristics are more or less predictive of attrition for non-citizen recruits than they are for citizen recruits.

Second, we could explore measures of first-term performance other than attrition. We could test, for example, whether non-citizen recruits advance more quickly.

Third, we could examine whether non-citizens are likely to be short-term or career servicemembers by investigating how likely they are to remain in the military since becoming citizens. On one hand, since citizenship is a prerequisite for obtaining a security clearance, non-citizen recruits who naturalize might be doing so to enhance the opportunities available to them in the military. On the other hand, non-citizens might join the military solely for the purpose of attaining citizenship, and so would be less likely to stay after becoming a citizen.

In conclusion, the military should pay more attention to the recruitment of non-citizens, who currently make up only a small portion of enlisted accessions. With Because of their low first-term attrition rates, diverse backgrounds, and strategic language skills, non-citizens are a potentially valuable resource for military recruiting.

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