

# All-volunteer US military still offers a pathway for young men

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For many Americans coming out of high school, college, military service and the workforce represent the primary avenues of opportunity. With rising costs and stiff academic requirements, college tends to draw students from a relatively advantaged background. The all-volunteer military service also provides life opportunities to the "less advantaged" through access to material and educational benefits.

However, apart from patriotic values, it is unclear why young men continue to choose the military, with its inherent risks of combat, instead of college or the labor force. New research findings published in *Social Science Quarterly* address this question. Data are based on the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, with 6,900 young males between the ages of 18 and 27, from high schools across the U.S.

Lead author Glen H. Elder, Jr., a Faculty Fellow of the Carolina Population Center and Research Professor of Sociology at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, speaks of the attraction of the military for these young people, "The military offers enhanced life chances for them — especially when they lack the resources for college, both personal and socioeconomic, and view the military as a more promising pathway than entry-level opportunities in the workforce."

These enlistees tend to cluster in the middle range on cognitive ability, but rank below average on family income, and have not done as well as other youth in academics. They report friends in the military, but have minimal social support from family and school, and come with a history

of contact sports and involvement in fights. This aggressive behavior is especially common among [young men](#) with poor grades in secondary school.

The study does not address the long-term effects of [military service](#), but the evidence suggests that military service tends to minimize social inequalities. Further research will tell whether the pathway from relative disadvantage to military service defines a "positive turning point in life chances" for this generation.

**More information:** "Pathways to the All-Volunteer Military." Glen H. Elder, Jr., et.al. Social Science Quarterly; Published Online: April 6, 2010, [DOI:10.1111/j.1540-6237.2010.00702.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6237.2010.00702.x)

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