

RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION TRENDS IN THE ONTARIO PRIMARY RESERVE

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The Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) has recently experienced difficulties in maintaining its desired numbers of personnel and has sought to remedy this with a renewed emphasis on recruitment and retention.¹ Adjacent to this focus, the CAF is also attempting to reach the goal of 25% women in the CAF by 2026.² The reserves have also been a highly debated topic of late, with various articles in the *Canadian Military Journal* claiming the reserves need a stronger focus on recruitment and retention;³ that the reserves are not ready for the next conflict Canada will face;⁴ a rebuttal to the previous assertion;⁵ and an article in defence of reserve armouries.⁶ These trends prompted the CIDP's Gender Lab team to conduct a study on the members of the Canadian primary reserve in Ontario in order to elucidate member attitudes towards recruitment and retention. The results of our study have broader implications for the CAF's practices surrounding recruitment and retention.

Our study, funded by a Mobilizing Insights in Defence and Security (MINDS) Targeted Engagement Grant (TEG), aimed to gather qualitative data on perceptions and beliefs regarding recruitment and retention trends in the CAF. Members at various levels within the reserves were part of our study including those involved with command and recruitment as well as newly recruited and trade qualified members. The original plan of conducting focus groups was disrupted by COVID19, and interviews were conducted primarily over the phone. Twenty-nine reservists were interviewed in early 2020: twenty-four men and five

women. Twenty-five participants identified their ethnicity as Caucasian.

Insight into National Recruitment and Retention Patterns

Based on our interviews, a successful strategy involved making recruitment a priority at the unit. Mentioning recruitment at parade night and at training events and encouraging reservists to carry recruiting cards were key factors. Asking reservists to be present at recruiting events is also important, as it makes local units seem more accessible. Social media engagement by recruiting teams across multiple platforms also helped to attract recruits.

The effectiveness of this strategy rests partially on the population density of Ontario as a whole, and the exposure of the general population, particularly university and college students, to the military. The part-time nature of the reserves, as well as recently implemented programs such as full-time summer employment, and a stipend which goes toward higher education, appeal especially to the student demographic. Overall, five key trends from the study are instructive and nationally relevant.

Success was seen when an environment was created which encourages others to join. This environment is most successful when created at two levels. First, the command team's (the commanding officer and the senior non-commissioned member of the unit) commitment to involving all members directly in recruitment helps create a culture of attracting talent. Second, when camaraderie was high

and there were activities to participate in, reservists actually wanted to talk about being a part of the reserves because they enjoyed their work. Fostering an environment that is positive went a long way towards encouraging recruitment. Creating a permissive environment for recruitment also included not discouraging those who wanted to be in the reserves temporarily, or were using the reserves for a particular purpose, such as a stepping stone to the regular force, or as a part time job during university or college. In short, reservists join for many reasons, and gaining units need to be more inclusive of them.

Problems persist in the recruiting process. Despite the changes to the recruiting process, which have made it more accessible, the participants in our study reported that problems persisted. Recruits often still felt that they had to follow up themselves to keep the recruitment process going, and experienced difficulties navigating the recruitment system or getting accurate information. Overall, it seemed that the recruiting timeline was slightly sped up under the new system.

The public has a bad perception about the CAF's treatment of underrepresented groups. The participants in our study claimed that they felt like the public thought the CAF was not a good place for women or racialized groups. Participants felt that their own environment in the reserves was a welcoming and safe place. A lack of confidence in the CAF's treatment of underrepresented groups is confirmed in opinion polls from the Canadian public, and the CAF is currently trying to challenge this through diverse portrayals in their ads and other programs.⁷ However, it should be noted that discrimination and violence against underrepresented groups does exist in the CAF, and this can be difficult to measure when our sample was mostly white men. Many of our respondents found it hard to talk about issues that might affect underrepresented populations and did not know how to make their own places of work more welcoming. As recent headlines suggest, this problem continues. Moreover, it not only poses a risk to trust in the organization, but it also poses a major risk to attracting and retaining talent.

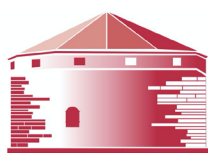
Junior members were more satisfied with their experiences. From our interviews, it seemed that junior members were satisfied with their initial training and excited for their future. However, as they progressed through the ranks, individuals began to find problems with the lack of training for corporals and lieutenants who constitute the junior-most leaders among both the non-commissioned and commissioned officers. A lack of quality equipment to train with was also noted. Corporals and lieutenants in particular felt undertrained and underqualified to train incoming recruits. This is an issue for retention, as new recruits may receive lower quality training, and corporals and lieutenants may themselves feel undervalued.

Retention strategies were not well defined. Training was often cited as a key strategy for retention by participants. The logic here is that providing members of the unit with training opportunities will keep them engaged and motivated to stay in the reserves. While training is an effective recruitment strategy,⁸ there is little guidance on how to leverage this as a retention strategy. Building on the previous point, corporals and lieutenants feel unsatisfied with available training opportunities and this dissatisfaction is poised to negatively impact retention. Developing tailored retention strategies will be especially important as COVID-19 impacts the recruitment and individual training cycle.

Preliminary Recommendations at the Unit Level

Some of these trends can be implemented as suggestions for primary reserve units across Canada.

1. **Target a diverse set of demographics which relate to long-term goals.** Both our participants and supplementary documents identified students as the primary demographic for recruitment. While this is a prudent move to increase recruitment numbers, this population is less stable as they are likely to move away from the area or look for a job outside the military in the field of their degree. This talent pool, while important, cannot constitute the only source of growth. Other students are also attaining professional degrees for specific



qualifications while at the reserves. Each city is different, but some key demographics to target overall could include for example part-time workers who would be attracted by CAF benefits and options for career advancement. Part-time workers are perhaps more likely to stay long-term than students.

2. Focus on building a culture that members want to be a part of and want to promote.

a. *Training for both skills and camaraderie.* The most commonly discussed positive experience reported by participants was training. It seems that training not only allows for the career advancement which members strive for, but also builds the community and camaraderie of a unit, encouraging members to stay. Ensuring training experiences remain positive and build skills and camaraderie will be key to both recruitment and retention efforts: the current members will want to stay and will encourage those around them to join due to their positive experiences. Units should ensure junior leaders are adequately trained and feel valued and ready to take on responsibilities. The issues that keep units from functioning cohesively should also be addressed, such as equipment issues and frustrations with command (such as how instructions are communicated and duties are assigned). Feedback from the junior non-commissioned and commissioned officer ranks are important, as these individuals clearly have opinions and ideas for a better CAF.

b. *A culture which fosters diversity.* Operation Honour training and material related to diversity in the CAF was only delivered to our participants at initial training and on days such as International Women's Day. Participants expressed the perception that there was too much training on diversity, but at the same time did not know how to report sexual misconduct or even basic facts about sexual misconduct, or equity, diversity and inclusion

in the reserves. As mentioned, participants also struggled to name strategies for a more inclusive unit. Equity, diversity, and inclusion as well as sexual violence prevention needs to be part of the culture. Incorporating accurate and relevant statistics, as well as clearly defined procedures and values in training is key to fostering an inclusive culture. The realities of what the CAF looks like must be addressed. For example, a woman is very unlikely to walk into a room full of women when joining the military, but this does not mean she cannot be made to feel welcome. Culture change needs to be taken seriously and should be explained as a positive policy shift rather than a "softening" of the CAF.

c. *Addressing and preventing sexual misconduct.* We found that most participants were unfamiliar with and surprised by the reality of sexual misconduct in the reserves. The CAF should work on presentations that can be tailored to the unit in question and create a model which allows outsiders to the unit to present the information. Senior members presenting the information might ring hollow when sexual misconduct in the reserves is often perpetrated by a senior member against a more junior member.⁹ A culture of transparency, with clear standards and procedures should be promoted: our participants did not know how to report sexual misconduct at their own unit. Clear processes need to be established and explained for reporting and accessing resources in cases of sexual misconduct.

Directions for Future Academic Work

In future academic work it will be especially important to look beyond units with the advantages of those in Ontario to examine the challenges that more isolated units with fewer resources face. We found that training was an essential aspect of both recruitment and retention in the reserves, but this may not be the case for the regular force where career trajectories and



culture are different. We suggest that comparative work on the reserves and the regular force would be useful in parsing these differences. Relatedly, our research was conducted as COVID-19 began to affect Canadians and affect our participants' lives. How this pandemic affects the culture in the CAF due to delayed

training and recruitment schedules will be crucial research going forward. Finally, we had a low sample of women and people of colour, and we could not examine the dynamics of being 2SLGBTQIA+ in a reserve unit; we look forward to academic studies which can better fill these gaps.

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ENDNOTES

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⁴ Riedel, Wolfgang W. "The Canadian Army Needs a Paradigm Shift." *Canadian Military Journal* 20 no. 2 (2020): 19-34

⁵ Howard G. Coombs, "Letter to the Editor." *Canadian Military Journal* 20 no. 3 (2020): 4-5.

⁶ Doran, Dan A. "Sacrificing Culture in the Name of Strategy: Why Militia Armouries Matter." *Canadian Military Journal* 20 no. 4 (2020): 66-70.

⁷ Earncliffe Strategy Group. (2018). Views of the Canadian Armed Forces 2018 Tracking Study." Prepared for National Defence; Fuhr, S. (2019); The Director General Military Personnel Research. (2019). Canadian Armed Forces Prospect Survey. Defence Research and Development Canada.

⁸ Office of the Auditor General of Canada, "Report 5—Canadian Army Reserve—National Defence" (2016). https://www.oag-bvg.gc.ca/internet/English/parl_oag_201602_05_e_41249.html.

⁹ Burczykca, M. (2019). Sexual misconduct in the Canadian Armed Forces Primary Reserve, 2018. Statistics Canada, Summary Report.

