



Policy Brief

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Post-Millennials and the Canadian Armed Forces

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Considering the post-millennial generation in the context of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) recruiting is becoming increasingly significant.¹ Central to the CAF being able to successfully recruit and retain post-millennials is their ability to improve young persons' perceptions of the armed forces and implement meaningful change in terms of cultural practices. Shifting perception requires engaging with post-millennials through the platforms and tools that are currently being used most extensively by this demographic, as well as promoting the career flexibility and good that the military can accomplish. In addition, changing the culture of the CAF in order to demonstrate real commitment to diversity and inclusion is crucial if the CAF is going to be an attractive career choice for a significant number of the next generation of potential recruits.

Introduction

It is important to consider how evolutions in broader society will impact the CAF's composition. Beyond the typical understanding of diversity as comprising of elements such as gender and ethnicity, the CAF also needs to consider age and generational differences. Older age groups, such as 'boomers', born between 1946-1964, are having to tackle the arrival of 'post-millennials' or 'generation-Z', born any time after 1997, 2000, or 2005, depending on the definition. Post-millennials differ in significant ways from preceding generations in the CAF, and as a result they have the potential to challenge the assumptions and structures embedded by current senior leaders.²

This brief looks at how post-millennials differ from older generations, what potential benefits they bring to the CAF, and how the perception of the CAF deters post-millennials from enlisting. This is particularly notable around lifestyles and perceptions of CAF culture, although it is important to acknowledge that certain demographics of post-millennials are still attracted to traditional conceptions of the CAF. This brief also offers some suggestions for the future, focusing on marketing and cultural change.

What do post-millennials bring to the CAF?

While young adults are traditionally the CAF's ideal recruitable population, due to their age and fitness, post-millennials in particular



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have a wide range of unique skills that would benefit the CAF. Post-millennials differ from older age groups primarily because they are the first generation to grow up completely immersed in a digital world, and young people are, in general, more skilled at using social media and other e-platforms compared to older generations. This results in an ability to use digital platforms in innovative and unique ways.³ Beyond this, post-millennials' use of online platforms means that they are particularly skilled at collaborative group work, thus resisting traditional 'top-down' hierarchies of knowledge that are present in the CAF.⁴ Rather than an example of insubordination, this should be perceived as a method for combatting professional inertia. This shift could also redefine mentorship relationships in the military, pivoting away from narrow conceptions, such as rank and age, towards skillsets and focused experiences.⁵

Post-millennials' distinctive and continuous virtual presence also means that they are comfortable sharing their opinions with the world on a wide variety of platforms. Because of this, they are adept at presenting different versions of themselves on different platforms, depending on their audience. For example, post-millennials will post different content on LinkedIn, where they connect with employers and other professional adults, as opposed to Instagram or Snapchat, where their primary audience is their peers. Aptitudes like this often mean that post-millennials have a strong sense of the best and worst of humanity, including the 'dark side' of the internet, such as cyberbullying, trolling, and misinformation.⁶ Compared to other generations, post-millennials are better at confronting these issues, such as by recognizing 'fake news' or 'deep fakes.' A 2019 study found that the 18-29 age group shared seven times fewer articles from fake news domains than the over-65 age group.⁷

The post-millennial prioritization of fairness and authenticity will also lead to them demanding that their superiors articulate the moral principles behind decision-making processes,⁸ and if these principles are not successfully explained, will follow their own moral compasses. This means the CAF will need to accommodate differing worldviews, and thus create work environments that encourage varied opinions, cultural perspectives, and lived experiences, while still maintaining a unity of purpose. The CAF's culture will also need to adapt to better suit the agility and creativity of post-millennials, which will result in them challenging established procedures, attempting new approaches, and utilizing ideas that originate from outside of the CAF.⁹ In the context of mentoring, post-millennials will likely desire mentorship relationships centred around these principles that are more holistic than prescriptive.¹⁰ Simply, if handled correctly, the recruitment and retention of post-millennials can be a genuine asset for the CAF.

Why don't post-millennials want to join the CAF? What are the consequences for the CAF if they fail to recruit post-millennials?

There are several reasons that post-millennials may have different concerns or reservations about joining the CAF as compared to previous generations. These can be divided into two broad themes: the post-millennial lifestyle and the prevailing perceptions and realities of the CAF.

The lives and careers of post-millennials differ from preceding generations at their age. Post-millennials, particularly women, are delaying and rearranging traditional life events. Marriages, buying a home, and having children are occurring significantly later compared to earlier generations, and for many post-millennials, they may not happen at all. Furthermore,

although family structures are very different from fifty years ago, CAF culture and policies have not evolved sufficiently. Civilian partners now need to be considered more carefully. Relatedly, post-millennials are much more attracted to living in urban centres as opposed to suburban or rural regions. In combination, this means that relocations to remote areas where non-military partners will not have sufficient work, education, and lifestyle opportunities seriously deters young people from enlisting.¹¹ Current developments also suggest post-millennials are going to have significantly more jobs and careers throughout their adult life, in a wider variety of industries, than previous generations. Simultaneously, young Canadians also prioritize a strong and distinct work-life balance and believe a military career fails to offer that.¹² The CAF therefore needs to find ways to accommodate those who want a career that frequently changes and grows, but does not consume their entire lives.

Certain elements of post-millennial perceptions of the CAF, as well as its realities in terms of diversity and inclusion, deter young people from enlisting. The lack of diversity and inclusion across the CAF, along with the continuing incidences of sexual harassment and assault, are both strong deterrents for young people, especially young women.^{13 14} It is therefore possible that if post-millennials are considering a career in politics or government, they are more likely to be drawn to the civil service, in part because it better projects an image of itself as a professional workplace.

Generally, post-millennials are more likely than older generations to view the Canadian military as an institution that is rooted in nationalism and colonial legacies, concepts which a significant number of young people are less comfortable with. While much of this belief originates from the US involvement in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and perceptions of American expansionism in general, this does not mean that it has not negatively impacted conceptions of the CAF. As noted above, post-millennials prioritize principles such as fairness and morality. It is possible that many post-millennials disagree with the CAF idea of 'service before self', especially if the service in which they are being ordered to participate in contradicts their moral principles. While some post-millennials may choose to join the CAF because they consider it a worthy career of altruistic work defending Canada, other youth view it as a rigid and exclusive institution that does not align with their values.

It is, however, important to note that not all post-millennials can or should be painted with such broad strokes. Francophone post-millennials, for instance, generally perceive the military more negatively than their anglophone peers due to a lack of distinctive francophone identity in the CAF. Nevertheless, many young white men are still attracted to a career in the CAF, as demonstrated by the research conducted on the Canadian Army Reserves by CIDP Research Associate, Bibi Imre-Millei, alongside Mr. Steve Taylor and Dr. Stéfanie von Hlatky.¹⁵ Unlike other post-millennials, the idea of a lifelong career appeals to them, as well as regular deployments and postings to non-urban settings. Moreover, the CAF offers opportunities for adventure and travel through training and deployment, as well as camaraderie with like-minded recruits, and the flexibility of the reserves made this facet of the CAF particularly appealing to broader groups of post-millennials. Reservists can also be part-time, giving young people the chance to participate in something they believe in while maintaining their freedom and offering them opportunities to progress their career.

There are serious consequences for the CAF if it cannot successfully recruit a diverse number of post-millennials in coming years. The CAF should reflect Canadian society, and an entirely white, entirely male CAF fails in that regard. Even more seriously, if the CAF fails to attract the best and brightest of the post-millennial generation, in just a few decades, there could be no servicemembers qualified to fill leadership positions in the CAF.

Policy Recommendations

In further attracting post-millennials to enlist in the CAF, policy should be focused on two tracks: marketing and genuine cultural change.

The CAF needs to pivot in terms of the content and method of its marketing campaigns. Rather than selling a career in the military as an opportunity to visit other countries – which has links with imperialism and human rights violations for many post-millennials – they should instead focus on promoting the CAF as an opportunity to pursue a ‘noble cause’ at home, rather than abroad. This can mean a wide variety of things, but could potentially include a focus on domestic services that the CAF provides, such as aid during natural disasters and national emergencies. Many young people have a narrow understanding of the career paths offered by the CAF outside of combat positions, so raising awareness would also be extremely beneficial in attracting youth. Similarly, the CAF’s marketing to young Canadians should emphasize the flexibility that a career in the military can provide, while still being realistic about the demanding expectations of a military career. While some post-millennials are seeking a life-long career in the CAF, many are not, and marketing campaigns should reflect options such as the reserves. Third, the CAF’s social media marketing needs to extend more broadly to platforms that post-millennials frequently use. Many young Canadians do not use Facebook, and CAF marketing should adapt to their digital habits to appeal to them.

Beyond changing the marketing model, genuine cultural change is required to convince those who fundamentally disagree with and dislike the CAF’s goals and cultural practices. As mentioned above, this could mean adapting the goals of the CAF to prioritize domestic operations over foreign deployments, but it also means changing the CAF’s internal culture, focusing more on collaborative teamwork, and shifting away from the prioritization of rank and hierarchies. More anti-discrimination work is required to make the CAF a safe and welcoming environment for post-millennials coming from a diverse array of backgrounds. Beyond this, the CAF also needs to ensure marginalized and underrepresented members are heard when they discuss their lived experiences. In combination, this will result in a fundamental but necessary culture change for the CAF, which it needs to accomplish while still managing to appeal to young Canadians who want to join the military for more traditional reasons.

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Endnotes

- 1 This Policy Brief is a general overview of the challenges and opportunities of recruiting and retaining post-millennial servicemembers, rather than a comprehensive review of research on this subject. Additional information was drawn from discussion that took place during the *Many Faces of Diversity* workshop.
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