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Recommendations for improving recruitment and retention in the Primary Army Reserve

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As the the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) deals with a sexual misconduct crisis the Chief of Defence Staff called “existential,” major shortages of personnel in terms of trained, effective strength exacerbate the challenge.¹ The Reserve Force is not only important to augment the capacity of the Regular Force, as was made apparent during Canada’s involvement in Afghanistan, but is an essential link between the military and Canadian society. This augmentation is especially important given that Reserve units can be found in Canada’s large urban centres and are in daily contact with their communities. With the uptick in domestic operations, the demands placed on the Reserves will inevitably grow. But as one participant in our study noted, the CAF has been designed, equipped, and sustained with a “default Regular Force mentality.” In that context, the Reserves need more attention and tailored recommendations when it comes to recruitment and retention.

Our recommendations are intended to inform the current policy update using three years of research on the Army Reserves. Between 2019 and 2022 the team at the Centre for International and Defence Policy interviewed 79 Reservists for two separate Mobilizing Insights in Defence and Security Targeted Engagement grants which built on each other to investigate recruitment and retention in the Reserves. Most participants came from urban units, so this study primarily speaks to the experiences of those in larger units which have a greater recruiting pool (including university students). While we acknowledge that the CAF has adopted new policies that address some of the challenges below, this policy brief’s primary focus is on members’ perceptions of and experiences with the Army Reserve.

Career progression, training timelines, and retention

While the units observed are successfully recruiting for the most part, our study has shown that retention concerns are common to all units investigated, primarily connected to inefficiencies in the system and personnel shortages. Indeed, Reservists lose interest when they cannot get access to the courses they need to be trained and qualified, feeling they are “paid little to do nothing” as noted by a participant. When opportunities do open for training and exercises, we heard complaints about the suitability and availability of equipment, from



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the fit of rucksacks and frag vests, to ammunition shortages and the lack of radios. | Without what one former commanding officer dubbed “real and realistic training,” people wonder why they enrolled in the first place. | Cumulative discontents wear out servicemembers; the CAF must continue to address these concerns, through initiatives like the *CAF: New Vision for the Reserves*, or risk exacerbating personnel shortages even further.

To improve recruitment and retention in the Reserves, the Department of National Defence (DND) will need to increase its training capacity at a time when there is a shortage of instructors. Investments in new equipment, following a needs-based assessment across Army Reserve units, combined with improved human resources policies, could help address the grievances and discontents that affect both recruitment and retention. Beyond the equipment needs mentioned above, modest investments that directly benefit members of the unit can make a big difference in morale. For example, members of one unit offered that having basic gym equipment could be one such measure, allowing recruits to focus on fitness as they wait to get trained and qualified.

Modernization of the PER system and paysheets would also be an investment which could free up NCO time for instruction and training. These antiquated systems consume staff hours, create situations where payments are late, and contribute to overall dissatisfaction tied to being in the military. Investment in IT equipment will also optimize units’ administrative capacity and increase cybersecurity. More computers and better internet/wifi can help members of the unit complete online courses during training nights, to move to Army skills training earlier. Administrative updates are being introduced, like the PaCE system for personnel evaluations, as well as the testing of a new electronic time and paysheet management application, but this remains a source of dissatisfaction at the unit level.

To address the shortfall in training capacity in the Reserves DND will have to get creative. This could involve the hiring of contractors to instruct courses that are in dire need to relieve some pressure in the training system without using contractors as a blanket solution. In the Reserves, coordination between the brigade and division levels will be essential to determine which courses could be delivered by contractors. Reservists who are on Class B contracts² should also be utilized. Currently there is no compensation or protected time for Reservists on Class B contracts to perform taskings for the Reserves. Many do so for free, out of a sense of loyalty and commitment to their home unit. | The Regular Force should release individuals on Class B contracts for at least 2 weeks per year to support their home unit. Without financial compensation and/or protected time, these Reservists are unable to support the training effort in the Reserves and can put themselves at risk of burning out. |

Some participants also noted positive experiences training alongside Regular Force members; bringing in Regular Force members as instructors helps improve mutual understanding and integration in the CAF. While there is policy guidance in *Strong, Secure, Engaged (SSE)* to “ensure Reservists are a well-integrated component of the total force,” and the *Canadian Army Modernization Strategy (CAMS)*, which calls for “full integration of the Regular and Reserve components,” we note that there is still a gap between formal policies and servicemembers’ experiences and perceptions. CAMS and the new *Soldier Readiness Plan – Reserves* is also designed to benefit the Army Reserves training capacity and overall quality of the training, but the timeline for units to truly feel the positive effects of those changes is uncertain.

The situation of the overburdened Class B Reservist stands in sharp contrast to the abundance of untrained privates and corporals whose career progression is stalled due to the lack of course slots. Some women participants also noted a lack of attention to their career progression, particularly that superiors waited longer for them to be “ready” for courses than the men around them. To maintain the interest of Reservists at all levels, it will not only be important to get recruits on the right courses, but to provide training and exercise opportunities that make them want to stay and discuss their unique experiences. Understanding that deployment opportunities are limited, more opportunities for OUTCAN training, or joining exercises in different parts of Canada (including the North) will be important. Adventure training can also be a great incentive to develop the skill of Army Reservists and keep them interested when courses are limited. Many participants felt the Reserves “dangle the carrot of future deployment” with no follow through from leadership. Providing more realistic timelines for deployment and being transparent about what opportunities might be available is important for overall job satisfaction.

Hands-on and responsive recruitment

While the discussion thus far has focused on retention, most participants had a negative perception of the recruitment process. This was due to delays and the feeling of being left wondering about the status of their application. The CAF finds itself in a competitive job market and faces an unnecessary loss of applicants due to the long duration between expression of interest and being sworn in.

We found recruiters regularly follow up with applicants due to personal initiative and not systematization. This good practice needs to be formalized, along with other incentives for informative and responsive recruiting. Most participants noted that recruiter interactions were positive when they occurred, but that a lack of detailed information and communication created stress and confusion during the process. At the unit level, participation in recruitment activities should be reframed as a method to positively contribute to the CAF, as opposed to being perceived as taking servicemembers away from the more “engaging” aspects of CAF life. More stability in recruitment teams within units is also desirable as file familiarity saves time and ensures that applicants will have their questions addressed. Participation in recruiting could be incentivized by giving recruiting team members priority for courses they need for promotion or skill-building. | Many participants emphasized people skills and excitement about the Reserves as important elements of a good recruiter, they wanted “someone who can interact with the public” and can speak to “diverse groups of people.” |

While recruiters should be enthusiastic and convincing, they still have a responsibility to be clear about what new recruits can expect. Many of our study participants expressed a sense of disappointment, as their expectations about career progressions, the trade they chose, and day-to-day activities were not met. As one participant noted “I have lots of friends who asked me what we do. I have a hard time answering that.” Unmet expectations were identified as a retention issue in our study, with participants noting that if their expectations remained unmet, they would leave.

Recruiters and web platforms should offer as much information as possible about what new recruits can expect, with more detailed specifications for each trade. An online tool could be introduced to track progress, taking some pressure off recruiters. More information up front, from recruiters, is important, but also more flexibility in terms of changing trades, or changing status between part-time and full-time service would be beneficial. | Information delivered in creative ways, especially hands-on opportunities to observe units or practice fitness tests were seen by participants as important ways to engage recruits, especially women, and build their confidence. | While flexibility in employment is invoked in *The Journey*,³ these commitments have not yet materialized. Those who had the most positive experiences with recruiting, noted an openness regarding timelines, reassurance, honesty about requirements, showcasing of unit activities, and detailed information about trades. The clearer the expectations, the more the CAF can have certainty in recruiting the right person and finding the best fit.

The CAF draws on personal connections for recruitment; most participants learned about the military through family and friends. While this is an effective recruitment strategy, it does not contribute to the broader goal of diversifying the military. | Personal connections and sharing firsthand experiences are effective to convince applicants to join and replicating this personal touch beyond the tightknit circles of military families and friends will be a key recruitment challenge. | Relying on more community activities and leveraging leading organizations within the recruitment catchment area should be incentivized and rewarded, making sure these approaches are tailored to the sociodemographic makeup of communities through a GBA+ lens. Popular stereotypes of servicemembers continued to affect our participants. As one young woman noted, “friends come up to me and say you don’t look like you’re in the military, which is ridiculous because what do you have to look like to be in the military?”

Though most participants who were white men described their units as welcoming, this was not the case when it came to women and non-white participants, almost all of whom described incidents of othering or harassment based on gender, sexuality, race, or religion. Women and non-white participants did not feel represented in the CAF and comments from some recruiting team members confirmed a culture of moving “difficult” (non-Western names, immigrant backgrounds, those born outside of Canada) applicants to the bottom of the pile. With an already cumbersome security clearance process for new Canadians and immigrants,⁴ compounded by issues mentioned above, it is easy to see how the CAF continues to struggle recruiting and retaining under-represented groups.

Conclusion

Recruitment and retention are two sides of the same coin. After long wait times at the application phase, new recruits start their relationship with the CAF with a negative first impression, which gets exacerbated when “people can’t get into courses” as one participant noted. Relatively new Reservists may walk out the door after 18 months of service, not trained or qualified, with negative feelings toward an organization they were initially excited about. If the CAF is not meeting expectations from the application process to the first training opportunity, entry into the Reserves becomes a revolving door. Madame Arbour, in her recommendations from the independent external review,⁵ spoke to the lengthy recruitment

and training timelines, stressing that improving these processes is important as part of organizational reform. We agree.

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Endnotes

- 1 Brewster, Murray. "Eyre blames sexual misconduct crisis, pandemic for shrinking military." *CBC News*. October 26, 2021. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/wayne-eyre-armed-forces-sexual-misconduct-pandemic-1.6224791/>.
- 2 Class B service is full-time service of more than 12 consecutive days that is not operational in nature.
- 3 Government of Canada. "The CAF Journey philosophy—Six Pillars of Support for Canada's Military Members." <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/maple-leaf/defence/2022/05/caf-journey-philosophy-six-pillars-support-military-members.html>.
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- 5 Arbour, Louise. "Report of the Independent External Comprehensive Review." May 20, 2022. <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/report-of-the-independent-external-comprehensive-review.html>.
- 6 This research project was carried out at the Centre for International and Defence Policy, Queen's University (Ethics approvals: SSRRB 1709, GREB GPLST-130-17). The authors are listed in alphabetical order. Disclosure: Dr. Stéfanie von Hlatky is the Honorary Lieutenant-Colonel with the Princess of Wales' Own Regiment.