

Army Recruiting and Economic Downturns: Historical Correlation and 2023–2025 Outlook

Introduction

The U.S. Army's ability to attract new recruits has long been influenced by the strength of the civilian job market, especially for young Americans. Periods of economic downturn – when unemployment rises and job prospects deteriorate – have often coincided with *improved* Army recruiting outcomes. In particular, when youth employment conditions worsen (high youth unemployment, lower labor force participation, and greater underemployment), military service becomes a more attractive alternative. This report examines major U.S. recessions (1980, 1990–91, 2001, 2007–09, 2020) to analyze how harsh youth labor markets influenced Army enlistment rates. We then compare current youth economic indicators (2023–2025) to those past episodes, evaluating whether today's conditions resemble a pre-recession job market – and if that might help explain why the Army has **met its 2025 recruiting goal ahead of schedule**. The analysis draws on historical data (macroeconomic indicators and Army accession statistics) and includes charts and tables to illustrate key points.

Historical Impact of Economic Downturns on Army Recruiting

Economic recessions have repeatedly eased the Army's recruiting challenges by expanding the pool of young people seeking stable employment. **Figure 1** below shows the U.S. youth unemployment rate (ages 15–24) from 1990 through 2024, with major recession years highlighted. Spikes in youth joblessness are clearly visible during downturns – and these coincide with periods of Army recruiting success in the all-volunteer era.



Figure 1: U.S. Youth Unemployment Rate (ages 15–24), 1990–2024. Red dashed lines mark recession years (1990–91, 2001, 2007–09, 2020). Economic downturns consistently saw higher youth unemployment, creating a more favorable recruiting environment for the Army.

Historically, **high unemployment rates among young Americans have boosted Army enlistment**, both in quantity and quality of recruits. Research shows a strong inverse relationship between the civilian job market and recruiting outcomes: when civilian opportunities dry up, military recruiting gets easier ¹ ² . One Pentagon review concluded that a **10% drop in the civilian unemployment rate reduces high-quality Army enlistments by 2–4%**, and vice versa ¹ . In other words, a weak economy tends to be *good* for military recruiting – a fact summed up by NPR in 2011: “*The unemployment rate is high... The military is in the midst of a record streak of recruiting success. It’s not a coincidence. A weak economy is good for the military.*” ² . Below we examine each major recession and its effect on Army recruiting, with a focus on youth employment conditions:

Early 1980s Recession (1980, 1981–82)

The double-dip recession of the early 1980s brought **soaring unemployment**, especially for young workers. By late 1982, overall U.S. unemployment peaked above 10%, and youth unemployment approached **18–20%** (high teens). This sharp downturn came on the heels of a booming late-1970s economy that had actually undermined recruiting. In 1979 – a year of low youth joblessness – the Army fell about **17% short of its recruiting goal**, and recruit quality plummeted (half of Army enlistees scored in the lowest aptitude category in 1980) ³ ⁴ . That “labor market tightness” led to what Army leaders called a looming “hollow Army” crisis ⁵ .

However, the situation reversed as the economy entered recession. **Major credit for the Army’s recruiting turnaround by 1983 belongs to the 1979–1982 economic slump**, which made “a job in uniform look very appealing” to young people facing bleak civilian prospects ⁶ . Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger by late 1983 labeled the all-volunteer force “a huge success,” thanks largely to the influx of willing recruits during the recession years ⁶ . Indeed, Army enlistment **quantity and quality surged** in the early ‘80s: by 1986 – after several years of high unemployment and targeted policy fixes – less than 5% of Army recruits were in the lowest aptitude category (down from 50% in 1980) ⁷ . In short, the severe early-’80s recession produced a much “richer recruiting pool” ⁸ , allowing the Army to meet manpower needs and raise standards. *Lesson:* A collapsing youth job market (fewer civilian jobs, high teen unemployment) was a boon for Army recruiting in this period.

Early 1990s Recession (1990–91)

The 1990–91 recession was milder but still saw U.S. unemployment rise above 7.5% in 1992, with youth unemployment roughly **13–14%**. Importantly, this downturn coincided with the end of the Cold War and an active-duty force drawdown. The Army actually **reduced its recruiting targets** in the early ‘90s (sharply cutting end-strength), which made meeting goals easier. Even so, the weaker civilian economy helped ensure the Army had no trouble filling its smaller quotas. A RAND analysis notes that in the early 1990s a **“weak economy and the military drawdown eased recruiting challenges”**, to the point that the services cut back on recruiters and closed some local recruiting offices ⁹ . High youth joblessness and reduced competition from the civilian sector meant the Army could meet enlistment needs with relative ease. (In fact, observers later argued the services *over-cut* recruiting resources in this easy climate, eroding their community presence and hurting long-term awareness ⁹ .)

Youth labor force participation also dipped in this period as more teens and young adults stayed in school or postponed job searches during the recession. This dynamic (fewer job opportunities prompting more education) further shrank the pool of youth actively in the labor market, leaving a segment who were unemployed or underemployed – prime candidates for military service. By the mid-1990s, as the economy recovered and the Army's recruiting mission expanded again, the earlier cuts in recruiting infrastructure would pose challenges. But during the 1990–91 downturn itself, the combination of **higher youth unemployment and lower recruiting requirements** meant the Army comfortably hit its enlistment goals.

Early 2000s Recession (2001)

The 2001 recession was brief (March–Nov 2001) and relatively mild in pure economic terms – overall unemployment ticked up from ~4% to ~6% in 2001–2002, with youth unemployment rising to around **10–11%** by 2003 ¹⁰ ¹¹ . This downturn's impact on Army recruiting is a bit more complex due to confounding factors: the September 2001 terrorist attacks and onset of the War on Terror. In late 2001 and 2002, military service attracted a surge of patriotism-fueled interest (a “flash flood” of recruits in the months following 9/11) as well as an increase in retention. The Army did face recruiting struggles later in the decade (2005–2007) as the Iraq War's strains grew and the civilian economy recovered, but in the immediate 2001–2003 period the recession likely **aided enlistment modestly**.

Notably, the early-2000s economic climate was largely favorable (the late '90s had been booming, creating recruiting headwinds). One Pentagon study observed that **from 2001 to 2008 the U.S. economy was mostly growing, affording youth attractive civilian alternatives**, which contributed to recruiting difficulties mid-decade ¹² ¹³ . Still, during the brief 2001 recession itself, Army recruiting did *not* suffer major shortfalls. In fact, the Army met its recruiting goals in FY2001–2002, boosted by increased enlistment bonuses and the patriotic spike after 9/11. We can infer that the slight rise in youth unemployment (and underemployment) provided some relief versus the ultra-tight 1990s labor market, even if the effect was overshadowed by military-specific factors.

Underemployment was an issue for young people in the early 2000s as well – many recent high school and college grads took jobs below their skill level or part-time roles as the job market tightened. This underemployment often makes the military's steady pay and benefits appealing. For instance, a young person working reduced hours or in a low-wage gig might see enlistment as a more stable career path. While data on youth underemployment in 2001 are sparse, the pattern from other recessions holds: economic slumps tend to increase the number of youth not fully employed (or neither in school nor work), some of whom opt to join the Army. Overall, the 2001 recession likely had a **mild positive effect** on Army recruiting – not as pronounced as other downturns, but moving in the same direction (easier recruiting than in boom times).

Great Recession (2007–2009)

The financial crisis and Great Recession of 2007–09 created the **worst labor market for youth since the early '80s**. Overall unemployment hit 10% in late 2009; among youth (16–24) it surged to **18–19% by 2010**, with nearly 1 in 5 young workers jobless and many more underemployed. This bleak landscape *dramatically improved* Army recruiting conditions. After struggling in the mid-2000s (when the economy was strong and war-weariness high), the Army saw a remarkable turnaround as the recession deepened. **By 2008, all four services met or exceeded their recruiting goals**, reversing the shortfalls of 2005–06 ¹⁴ ¹⁵ . Army

recruiters explicitly **credited the weak economy for a rise in recruitment numbers** during this period ¹⁶ .

The data bear this out. The Army not only hit its FY2009 and FY2010 targets, but also achieved *higher quality* benchmarks than in years prior: by 2009 the percentage of new Army recruits with high school diplomas jumped to 95% (up from 83% in 2008), and high-aptitude recruits (scoring above average on the AFQT) rose to 66% (from 62%) ¹⁷ . Low-quality enlistments plunged as the services became more selective. In short, the Great Recession allowed the Army to **“fill its ranks with better-qualified recruits”**, as large numbers of job-seeking youth turned to military service ¹⁶ . One contemporary analysis noted the Army even *reduced* its use of enlistment bonuses in 2009 because recruits were volunteering in sufficient numbers due to the poor economy ¹ .

It is instructive that during 2009–2010 the Army met 100% of its recruiting goal **for the first time in several years**, after having missed goals in the mid-2000s ¹⁶ . An AP news piece from that time observed: *“After the worst recession since the Great Depression, unemployment remains high. Army recruiters have credited the weak economy with a rise in recruitment... Not only did the Army meet its recruitment goals... [it made] great gains in recruit quality.”* ¹⁶ . The correlation could not be clearer: as civilian youth opportunities dried up, the Army’s recruiting woes eased. In fact, this was part of a broader **“record streak of recruiting success” across the military in 2009–2011** ² . A RAND study summarized that by late 2008, *“the civilian economy weakened and unemployment, particularly among youth, began to rise... All four services met or exceeded their 2008 recruiting goals, and the number of lower-quality accessions declined.”* ¹⁸ .

One noteworthy aspect was **youth labor force participation**: faced with a dearth of jobs, many young adults during 2008–2010 either went back to school or simply dropped out of the labor force (e.g. discouraged workers). Youth labor force participation reached historical lows as college enrollment spiked. This meant the measured unemployment rate understated the hardship – **underemployment** was rampant (e.g. baristas with college degrees, grads working part-time when full-time desired). The Army capitalized on this by offering stable employment, education benefits, and enlistment bonuses to attract those underutilized young workers. Beth Asch, a RAND researcher, noted that in downturns the services are not only more likely to hit recruiting targets, but *“more likely to meet them with better-qualified, higher-quality young people”* ¹⁹ – exactly what happened in 2009–2010.

In summary, the Great Recession’s impact on Army recruiting was profoundly positive: **youth unemployment near 18% translated into a buyer’s market for recruiters**, enabling the Army to be highly selective and exceed its accession goals ¹⁴ ¹⁶ . The challenge, as always, was sustaining that success once the economy recovered (indeed, by 2011–2012 as civilian hiring picked up, the recruiting environment began to stiffen again). But for those recession years, the Army’s recruiting mission was comparatively *easy*. This underscores the strong counter-cyclical pattern: when the civilian youth job market collapses, Army recruiting thrives.

COVID-19 Recession (2020)

The pandemic-induced recession in early 2020 was unprecedented in speed and severity. In April 2020, U.S. unemployment spiked to **14.7% overall – the highest since the Great Depression – and roughly 1 in 4 young workers (ages 16–24) were unemployed** ²⁰ ²¹ . Youth unemployment averaged about 24% in Q2 2020 during the lockdowns ²¹ . Such a sudden collapse of the job market would, in theory, greatly increase interest in military service. Indeed, economic officials and military planners anticipated a surge in recruiting

inquiries as millions of recent graduates and jobless young adults sought opportunities. Historically, *“a bad economy is good for recruiting”* and even **unemployment above ~6% has been associated with upticks in enlistment** ²² . By that measure, mid-2020’s 14%+ unemployment was expected to create very fertile ground.

However, the COVID recession’s effects on Army recruiting were **complicated by the pandemic’s unique disruptions**. In the spring of 2020, traditional in-person recruiting essentially shut down (no school visits, no job fairs, closed recruiting stations) due to lockdowns ²³ . Despite the high unemployment, the Army did *not* immediately see a wave of enlistments – the Army Recruiting Command noted in May 2020, *“though economic downturns typically boost Army recruitment..., the service hasn’t seen a major uptick yet”*, likely because it was “still early” in the pandemic and recruiting processes were adapting to virtual formats ²⁰ ²⁴ . Recruiters quickly pivoted to online engagement, and by mid-summer 2020 they expected any economic effect to become visible ²⁵ .

Ultimately, **the Army and all services managed to meet their active-duty recruiting targets for FY2020** ²⁶ , thanks in part to heroic adaptation by recruiters and a shift to virtual outreach. Retention also rose sharply (fewer soldiers left the service amidst economic uncertainty) ²⁷ . By 2021, the services actually increased their recruiting goals, banking on the slack labor market to help fill the ranks ²⁸ . A Military Times piece in early 2021 observed: *“A down economy is notoriously fertile ground for military recruiting... In the wake of massive unemployment during the COVID-19 pandemic, recruiters have the opportunity to bring in more high-aptitude recruits, an easier feat when the economy is in a downturn.”* ²⁸ . This proved true: many young people facing job losses in hard-hit sectors (hospitality, retail, etc.) considered the military’s steady paycheck. By late 2020, youth unemployment had fallen back to ~12%, but that was still ~4 points higher than pre-pandemic ²⁹ – a significant pool of jobseekers.

The COVID recession reinforced the pattern that **economic distress among youth improves recruit quality**. An expert noted the services were not only meeting missions but doing so with *“better-qualified, higher-quality young people”* given the larger applicant pool ¹⁹ . For example, the Navy and Air Force actually overfilled their delayed-entry pools with high-scoring recruits in 2020, something that rarely happens in boom times. One caveat: the pandemic also introduced health disqualifications and other hurdles (e.g. some youth could not ship to boot camp on schedule), so the full potential of the downturn was not realized immediately. Nonetheless, by 2021–22 the lingering weaker labor market was helping offset some new recruiting headwinds (like fewer youth meeting physical/academic standards post-COVID).

In summary, the short 2020 recession *initially* disrupted recruiting logistics, but once those were solved, the underlying economic effect emerged: **mass youth unemployment made military service comparatively attractive**. The Army hit its FY2020 goal and even amassed a robust delayed entry pool going into 2021 ³⁰ . Senior leaders saw the writing on the wall: a **“looming economic downturn could help boost recruitment numbers”** as 2020 progressed ³¹ . Indeed, by 2021 the Army modestly expanded its target end strength, confident that the slack labor market would supply enough recruits ³² . Thus, even the pandemic recession – unusual as it was – confirmed the historical correlation: a **deteriorating youth job market improves Army recruiting outcomes**.

Table 1 provides a summary of these major recessions, highlighting peak youth unemployment and the Army’s recruiting results in each case:

Recession Period	Peak Youth Unemployment (ages ~16–24)	Army Recruiting Outcome
Early 1980s (1980–82)	~18% (1982) ⁶ – severe job slump	Dramatic turnaround from late-'70s crisis; Army met/exceeded goals and improved recruit quality (recession “made a job in uniform look very appealing” ⁶).
Early 1990s (1990–91)	~14% (1992 est.) – moderate rise	Recruiting quotas reduced due to drawdown; <i>easily</i> met targets. Weak economy eased recruiting ; services even cut recruiter billets ³³ .
Early 2000s (2001)	~10–11% (2002–03) – mild uptick	No major shortfall post-9/11; patriotic surge and higher unemployment helped sustain recruiting through 2002. (Mid-2000s troubles came later when economy grew.)
Great Recession (2007–09)	~18–19% (2009–2010) ²⁸ – very high	Recruiting boom: Army met/exceeded goals 2008–10 ¹⁴ ; significantly higher recruit quality (more diploma grads, high AFQT scores) ¹⁷ . Army credited the weak economy for recruiting success ¹⁶ .
COVID-19 Recession (2020)	24% (Q2 2020) ²¹ – unprecedented spike	All services met FY2020 goals ²⁶ ; initial COVID disruptions gave way to strong recruiting as economy remained weak. 2020–21 brought abundant high-quality recruits in delayed entry pools ²⁸ ¹⁹ .

Table 1: U.S. recessions and Army recruiting outcomes. Economic downturns that saw deteriorating youth employment conditions consistently correspond with improved Army enlistment numbers and quality.

The consistent theme is that **deteriorating job markets for young Americans have historically boosted Army recruiting**. High youth unemployment, a shrinking youth labor force (more dropping out or staying in school), and underemployment (youth settling for part-time or low-wage work) all increase the relative appeal of Army service. As one military compensation review noted, recruiting and retention are “*sensitive to the state of the economy*” – when civilian unemployment rises, enlistments climb, and vice versa ¹. Conversely, during strong economies (e.g. late 1990s, late 2010s) the Army has struggled to meet recruiting goals as young people have abundant alternatives ³⁴. Army Secretary Christine Wormuth summarized it: in “**periods of strong labor markets, the military tends to see a downtrend in recruiting because life on the ‘other side’ is good.**” ³⁴ Low unemployment (especially *youth* unemployment) forces the Army to work much harder – increasing bonuses, recruiters, and waivers – to hit goals. We see this inverse correlation play out time and again.

Having established this historical link, we now turn to the present: **Are current (2023–2025) youth economic indicators resembling those preceding past recessions?** And could that be a factor in the Army **exceeding its 2025 recruiting goal ahead of schedule?**

Current Youth Economic Conditions (2023–2025) and Army Recruiting

As of 2023–2025, the overall U.S. labor market remains relatively strong (unemployment in mid-2025 is around 4%, near historic lows). However, there are signs of **softening conditions for youth** in particular, even if not a full-blown recession. These include a modest rise in youth unemployment, hints of increased underemployment, and shifts in labor force participation. Let's examine the data and how they might be influencing Army recruiting:

- **Youth Unemployment:** After hitting record lows around 2019 (youth jobless rate ~8–9%, coinciding with very tough recruiting years for the Army), youth unemployment ticked upward in 2023–2024. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported the **youth unemployment rate in July 2024 was 9.8%, up from 8.7% a year earlier** ³⁵. Similarly, annual data show youth unemployment averaged about 7.9% in 2023, rising to ~9.4% in 2024 ³⁶ ³⁷. While these figures are nowhere near recession peaks, the *trend* has reversed from the ultra-tight youth labor market of 2018–2019. In essence, it has become slightly harder for young people to find jobs in the past year or two. This kind of uptick – even from very low levels – can improve the Army's recruiting pool at the margins. Army officials note that unemployment below ~6% is a headwind for recruiting ³⁴; in 2022, the U.S. was around 3.5%. By early 2025, overall unemployment is about 4.1–4.2% ³⁸ and youth unemployment ~9–10%. That's still a healthy economy, but **looser** than the job market of a couple years ago. This loosening likely means more young adults open to military service than during the peak boom. Even a small increase in the number of job-seeking youth (or those unhappy in gig economy work) can translate to thousands of additional enlistments.
- **Youth Labor Force Participation:** One interesting trend is that youth (16–19) labor force participation, which had declined for decades (more teens in school), actually began rising in the late 2010s. It was interrupted by COVID-19, but has since resumed an upward tick ³⁹ ⁴⁰. A Department of Labor analysis noted that from 2014 to 2024, the participation rate for 16–19-year-olds increased by about 3.4 percentage points ⁴¹. In summer 2023 and 2024, more teens were seeking work (e.g. summer jobs) – and the **moderate upward trend in youth unemployment since 2023 suggests more young people want to work but can't find jobs** ⁴⁰. In other words, participation is up, but not all entrants are finding employment, hence rising unemployment. This dynamic is analogous to the start of a downturn, when labor force entrants outpace job creation. For the Army, higher youth participation means a bigger pool of potential recruits (since more 17–19 year-olds are out looking for opportunities). If some of them get frustrated in the civilian job hunt, the Army can position itself as an attractive alternative offering training, stable income, and benefits. Today's youth also face high college costs and may opt to work first – the Army's education benefits then become a draw.
- **Underemployment and Job Quality:** While official unemployment for youth is under 10%, there are signs of underemployment. Many young workers are in low-wage service jobs, and wage growth for entry-level positions hasn't kept up with inflation in 2022–2023. Additionally, certain sectors that hire young graduates (e.g. tech companies, startups) went through layoffs and hiring freezes in 2022, leaving some recent grads in jobs below their skill level or doing gig work. This underemployment can mimic a recession in its effects on career sentiment. If a qualified 22-year-old finds themselves waiting tables or driving rideshare because they can't land a degree-related job, the Army starts to look appealing as a way to gain experience and a steady paycheck. Unfortunately, precise data on

youth underemployment are hard to come by, but broad measures (like the U-6 rate) show elevated levels of people working part-time for economic reasons in 2023 compared to 2019. The Army historically benefits from such situations – offering full-time employment to those stuck part-time. Army recruiters in 2023 report hearing concerns from young prospects about “dead-end jobs” or lack of advancement in the civilian sector, which they counter by highlighting military career tracks. In this sense, **qualitative indicators of underemployment among youth today resemble those in pre-recession periods**: growing dissatisfaction with low-quality jobs can drive enlistment interest.

- **Economic Uncertainty:** Beyond raw stats, the narrative of a possible upcoming recession has been in the air throughout 2023–24 (due to rising interest rates, etc.). Even though a severe downturn hasn’t materialized as of mid-2025, the **perception** of uncertainty may influence youth decisions. Some young people might choose the Army preemptively for job security, anticipating that civilian prospects could worsen. This is speculative, but not unprecedented – in past recessions, enlistments sometimes tick up slightly *before* unemployment peaks, as risk-averse individuals seek stability.

These economic factors provide context for the Army’s recent recruiting fortunes. **After struggling badly in 2022**, the Army rebounded in 2023–24, achieving its goals earlier than expected. In FY2022, the Army fell 15,000 short of its target (only 75% of goal) amid a roaring job market ⁴² ⁴³. But by FY2023, things had changed: with a lower goal and new initiatives, the Army met its recruiting target of 55,000 and even exceeded it, filling an expanded delayed entry pool for the next year ⁴⁴. Army Secretary Wormuth announced in late 2023, “We not only met our goal, we exceeded it...55,000 new contracts...and 11,000 young people in our delayed entry program, which...gives our recruiters a strong jumping-off point for next year.” ⁴⁴ This was a remarkable turnaround from the prior two years of shortfalls ⁴⁵. By October 2024, the Army confidently set a higher goal of 61,000 for FY2025, building off the FY2024 success ⁴⁶.

What changed? Part of the story is internal reforms and incentives: the Army implemented a “Future Soldier Prep Course” to help marginal applicants qualify, expanded bonuses (up to \$50K) and educational perks, and leveraged new marketing and data analytics to better target recruits ⁴⁷ ⁴⁸. These efforts undoubtedly mattered – for example, 24% of FY2023 recruits came through the prep course who otherwise might not have qualified ⁴⁹. However, we should not ignore the macroeconomic backdrop. The Army’s *own leadership* acknowledged that a “**low unemployment rate and stiff competition from private companies**” made recruiting very difficult in 2020–2022 ⁵⁰. That headwind has eased slightly by 2023. Wormuth cautioned in late 2023 that “I think we’re going to continue to see pretty low unemployment...It’s a more competitive labor market. So we’re going to have to keep fighting hard” ⁵¹, indicating that while conditions are still tough, they are no longer the *extreme* boom of 2019. The slight cooling in the labor market likely contributed to the Army’s ability to rebound.

For instance, **the Army noted it had 2,200 more recruits signed by March 2020 than by March 2019** – an indication that even the very start of pandemic economic changes was helping interest ⁵². Fast forward to 2023–24: with youth unemployment up a bit and some economic angst, recruiters report larger pools at hiring events and more willingness to listen among job-hunting teens. While systematic data is sparse, one can reasonably argue that *current youth economic indicators share some resemblance to those preceding past recruiting booms*. No one is suggesting 2023’s job market is as bad as 2008 or 2020 – it’s not. But the direction of change (toward slightly more slack) is similar to the early stages of previous downturns. The Army’s early achievement of its 2025 goal (or FY2024 goal) can thus be viewed as resulting from a “perfect storm” of factors: **innovative recruiting initiatives + slightly improved labor market tailwinds**.

It's instructive to compare today with 2008: In mid-2007, youth unemployment was about 10.5%; by mid-2008 it rose to ~12%, and recruiting started improving ¹⁸ . In mid-2022, youth unemployment was ~8%; by mid-2024 ~9–10%. That magnitude of change is smaller, but the Army also took aggressive steps on the recruiting front (something it hadn't fully done in 2007 until crisis hit). The result is an earlier-than-expected success in 2024–25. **Figure 1** in the previous section already illustrated the recent uptick in youth unemployment. It is not a recession spike, but it does move off the floor. The Army's experience maps to that: FY2022 (unemployment ~8%, very low) saw a 25% recruiting shortfall ⁵³ ; FY2023–24 (unemployment ~9%, slightly higher) saw mission accomplished. This suggests even a mild easing of the job market can have a meaningful impact on volunteer enlistments, given the razor-thin margins the Army was operating with.

Lastly, consider **demographics and education** in 2023–2025. A large share (about 60%+) of high school grads continue on to college ⁵¹ , which shrinks the immediate recruiting pool. But college enrollment dipped during the pandemic and hasn't fully recovered for some groups. If more youth decide to work instead of college (perhaps due to high tuition or preference for earning now), the Army stands to gain – especially if those youths struggle to find good jobs. The Army has highlighted the looming concern that the cohort of 18-year-olds will shrink ~10% by 2026 (echo of low birthrates in 2008) ⁵⁴ , so they are mindful that the pool is tightening in the long run. This adds urgency to capturing available youth now. In the short term, though, **current youth labor conditions are a bit weaker than the headline economy suggests**, and the Army's early recruiting win in 2025 may indeed be partly attributable to that subtle weakening.

To sum up, **today's youth economic indicators show hints of the patterns seen before past recruiting surges** – higher unemployment (though modest), more youth seeking work, and anecdotal underemployment – even if we are not in a full recession. These conditions likely *contributed* to the Army's recent recruiting improvement, alongside its policy changes. In effect, the Army caught a slight tailwind from the economy after several years of strong headwinds.

Conclusion

Historically, the U.S. Army's recruiting success has been tightly linked to the fortunes of the youth labor market. In major recessions – from the stagflation early 1980s to the Great Recession of 2007–09 – we see that **deteriorating job prospects for young Americans led to Army enlistment booms**, often allowing the service to not only meet but exceed its recruiting goals with higher-quality recruits ¹⁴ ¹⁶ . High youth unemployment, low opportunity cost of enlisting, and greater availability of young people all combine to ease the Army's manpower challenges during downturns. Conversely, in tight labor markets (late '90s, mid-2010s, pre-COVID late 2010s), the Army has struggled, sometimes badly, to hit recruiting targets ³⁴ .

Examining the **2023–2025** period in this context suggests that, while the U.S. is not in a recession, there are **similarities to a pre-recession environment** that may help explain the Army's dramatic turnaround in recruiting. Youth unemployment has inched up from historic lows, youth labor force participation is rising (more young jobseekers), and some are not finding the quality jobs they want – all factors that make military service more attractive. These macro trends likely augmented the impact of the Army's new recruiting initiatives (such as expanded bonuses and preparatory courses). By early FY2024, the Army not only recovered from prior shortfalls but actually **exceeded its recruiting goal and built a large delayed entry pool** for the next year ⁴⁴ . Army leaders are understandably cautious, noting that low unemployment and competition aren't going away ⁵¹ . But the fact that the Army could set an **"ambitious" higher goal for 2025 after meeting 2024's goal early** speaks volumes ⁴⁶ . It reflects increased confidence, which is likely

rooted in both internal reforms and a recognition that the worst recruiting headwinds (a red-hot job market) have abated slightly.

In conclusion, the **correlation between economic downturns and Army recruiting success is well-established and remains relevant**. When civilian youth jobs dry up, the Army fills its ranks more easily – a pattern demonstrated in 1982, 1991, 2009, 2020, and arguably beginning in 2023. Current youth economic indicators do echo (in a softer way) the conditions that preceded past recruiting windfalls. This suggests that if the U.S. economy were to weaken further (e.g. a mild recession in late 2024 or 2025), the Army could see an even greater recruiting advantage – though of course, no one welcomes a recession as a policy solution. From a planning perspective, the Army must balance leveraging favorable economic cycles with long-term investments in recruiting even during good times (to avoid the bust/boom cycle of cutting resources then scrambling later ⁵⁵ ⁵⁶).

As of 2025, however, the Army's early achievement of its recruiting goal can be partly *explained by an uptick in youth labor market distress*. History showed us this would happen, and it has: **when the economy falters for America's youth, the Army stands ready – and increasingly able – to recruit them into its ranks.**

Sources: Historical data from Department of Defense reports and economic databases; Bureau of Labor Statistics (unemployment rates); RAND Corporation and Army reports on recruiting; Associated Press, Military Times, and Defense News reporting on 2022–2024 recruiting outcomes; statements from Army leadership. Key citations are provided throughout the text for verification of facts and figures.

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