

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-22-105329](#), a report to congressional addressees

Why GAO Did This Study

Servicemember absences can negatively affect servicemembers, their families, and their units. Cases, such as the 2020 disappearance and murder of Army Specialist Vanessa Guillén, have provoked concerns about DOD's response to absences.

The Conference Report accompanying the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 includes a provision for GAO to review how DOD handles servicemember absences.

This report assesses the extent to which the (1) services collected and reported data on involuntary and voluntary absences during fiscal years 2017 through 2021, (2) services have established procedures for key personnel to respond to involuntary and voluntary absences, and (3) military criminal investigative organizations met staffing goals and identified staffing needs for special agents who conduct criminal investigations during fiscal years 2017 through 2021.

GAO analyzed absence and staffing data, reviewed policies, and interviewed DOD and service officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making eight recommendations, including that DOD provide guidance on collecting voluntary absence data and establish a process for reporting those data, the Marine Corps and Air Force establish procedures for responding to absences, the Army and Navy establish processes to identify special agent staffing needs, and the Air Force develop a staffing strategy for special agents. DOD generally agreed with the recommendations.

View [GAO-22-105329](#). For more information, contact Brenda S. Farrell at (202) 512-3604 or farrellb@gao.gov.

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SERVICEMEMBER ABSENCES

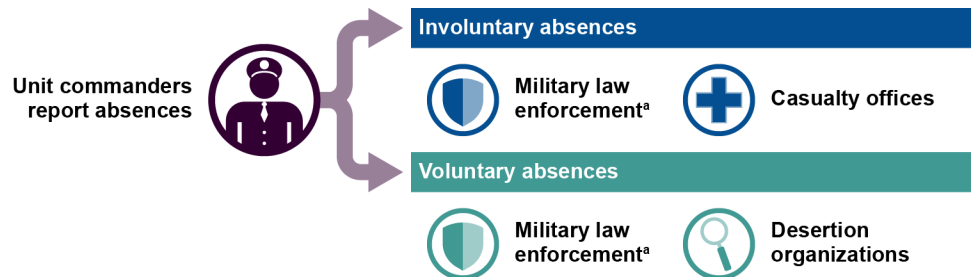
DOD Actions Needed to Enhance Related Data, Procedures, and Staffing

What GAO Found

The military services have collected and reported required data on involuntary absences, but the extent of voluntary absences is unknown. Involuntary absences are unintentional and can result from foul play or an accident, while voluntary absences are intentional and include desertions and unauthorized absences. GAO found that the services reported 157 servicemembers as involuntarily absent from fiscal years 2017 through 2021. The services also collected some data on voluntary absences during that time. However, the full extent of voluntary absences is unknown because some data were not complete or reliable. Moreover, the services did not regularly report such data to the Department of Defense (DOD). Providing data collection guidance and establishing a reporting process will better enable DOD to monitor the number of voluntary absences and assess efforts to deter and reduce them.

The services have established procedures for key personnel that address some, but not all, of their responsibilities for responding to absences. For example, all four services have established procedures for unit commanders to report absences to appropriate organizations (see figure). However, the Marine Corps has not established procedures to assist unit commanders in determining whether an absence is involuntary or voluntary. Additionally, the Air Force does not have procedures for investigating all types of absences. By establishing such procedures, the Marine Corps and Air Force will have greater assurance that absences will be properly identified and investigated.

Key Personnel and Organizations Involved in Responding to Servicemember Absences



Source: GAO analysis of military service information. | [GAO-22-105329](#)

^aMilitary law enforcement includes military criminal investigative organizations and military police.

During fiscal years 2017 through 2021, the Army, Navy, and Air Force military criminal investigative organizations met some staffing goals and identified some staffing needs for special agents who investigate servicemember absences. GAO found that the Army and Navy met or nearly met goals for filling authorized special agent positions, while the Air Force filled, on average, about 83 percent of its positions, falling short of its 100-percent goal. Also, although the Air Force identified staffing needs for special agents, the Army did not identify the number of special agents needed to fully address workload needs and the Navy could not identify the specific number of special agents needed separate from other investigative positions. Establishing processes to identify Army and Navy special agent needs and developing a strategy to meet the Air Force staffing goal will better position these services to ensure they have sufficient numbers of agents.