

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-19-160](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Air Force aircraft maintainers are responsible for ensuring that the Air Force's aircraft are operationally ready and safe for its aviators—duties critical to successfully executing its national security mission. With more than 100,000 maintainers across the Air Force's active and reserve components, according to Air Force officials, aircraft maintenance is the Air Force's largest enlisted career field—accounting for about a quarter of its active duty enlisted personnel.

The conference report accompanying the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2018 included a provision for GAO to review the adequacy of the Air Force's aircraft maintainer workforce. This report assesses the extent to which, from fiscal years 2010 through 2017, the Air Force (1) had aircraft maintainer staffing gaps, (2) experienced attrition of maintainers and took steps to help retain maintainers, and (3) met its annual technical school completion rate goals for maintainers.

GAO analyzed aircraft maintainer staffing levels, loss and reenlistment rates, and technical school completion rates from fiscal years 2010-2017, the most recent data available; conducted five non-generalizable discussion groups with maintainers; and interviewed aviation industry, Department of Defense, and Air Force officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Air Force develop annual retention goals and a retention strategy for aircraft maintainers. The Air Force concurred with both recommendations.

View [GAO-19-160](#). For more information, contact Brenda S. Farrell at (202) 512-3604 or farrellb@gao.gov.

February 2019

MILITARY PERSONNEL

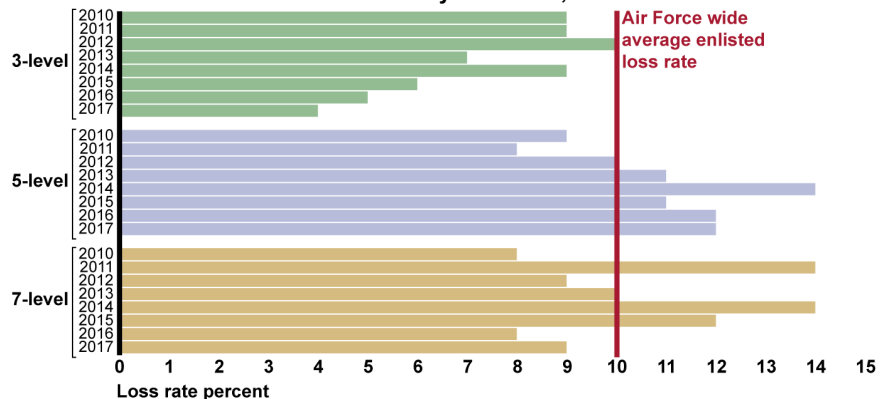
Strategy Needed to Improve Retention of Experienced Air Force Aircraft Maintainers

What GAO Found

The Air Force has reduced overall aircraft maintainer staffing gaps, but continues to have a gap of experienced maintainers. The Air Force reduced the overall gap between actual maintainer staffing levels and authorized levels from 4,016 maintainers (out of 66,439 authorized active component positions) in fiscal year 2015, to 745 in fiscal year 2017 (out of 66,559 positions). However, in 7 of the last 8 fiscal years, the Air Force had staffing gaps of experienced maintainers—those who are most qualified to meet mission needs and are needed to train new maintainers. Maintainers complete technical school as 3-levels and initially lack the experience and proficiency needed to meet mission needs. Following years of on-the-job training, among other things, maintainers upgrade to the 5- and 7-levels. In fiscal year 2017, the Air Force had gaps of more than 2,000 5-level and 400 7-level maintainers, and a surplus of over 1,700 3-levels. Air Force officials anticipate that staffing gaps will continue off and on through fiscal year 2023.

Over the past 8 fiscal years, the Air Force has increasingly lost experienced aircraft maintainers, and it does not have goals and a strategy to help retain maintainers. While overall maintainer loss rates have remained generally stable, loss rates of 5-levels increased from 9 percent in fiscal year 2010 to 12 percent in fiscal years 2016 and 2017 (see figure). Air Force officials expect 7-level loss rates to also increase. Air Force officials stated that they need to retain more maintainers to help address experience gaps, but the Air Force has not developed annual retention goals for maintainers. In addition, while the Air Force has increased its use of retention bonuses since fiscal year 2015, according to Air Force officials, it does not have a strategy to improve retention. Without goals to measure progress and a retention strategy to guide efforts, the Air Force could face further challenges in managing its maintenance workforce, including ensuring there are enough experienced maintainers to meet mission needs.

Air Force Aircraft Maintainer Loss Rates by Skill Level, Fiscal Years 2010-2017



Source: GAO analysis of Air Force data. | GAO-19-160

The Air Force consistently met technical school completion rate goals for aircraft maintainers from fiscal years 2010 through 2017. In fiscal year 2017, about 9,600 active component maintainers completed technical school, an increase from about 5,700 in fiscal year 2015. This increase in completions has helped to address overall staffing gaps, but cannot immediately resolve experience imbalances, due to the time and training needed to reach the 5- and 7-levels.