

Why GAO Did This Study

High demand and constant combat operations have created challenges for Air Force RPA pilots and sensor operators who conduct missions across the world. In January 2017, the Air Force approved a combat-to-dwell policy to better balance RPA units' time in combat with non-combat activities. It plans to fully implement the policy in 2024.

Senate Report 115-262 included a provision that GAO review ongoing challenges in the Air Force RPA community. This report assesses, among other things, the extent to which the Air Force (1) met overall RPA pilot and sensor operator staffing targets and tracked its progress in implementing its combat-to-dwell policy and (2) identified and met instructor staffing levels at its RPA formal training unit. GAO analyzed selected Air Force accession, retention, and instructor staffing data; held non-generalizable focus groups at three RPA military bases; and interviewed officials at various levels of the RPA enterprise.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Air Force establish a comprehensive metric (or set of metrics) to track the progress of its efforts to access and retain enough RPA personnel needed to implement its combat-to-dwell policy, and update the number of required RPA instructor positions. The Air Force partially concurred with the first recommendation and concurred with the second one. GAO continues to believe the first recommendation is valid, as discussed in the report.

View [GAO-20-320](#). For more information, contact Brenda S. Farrell at (202) 512-3604 or FarrellB@gao.gov

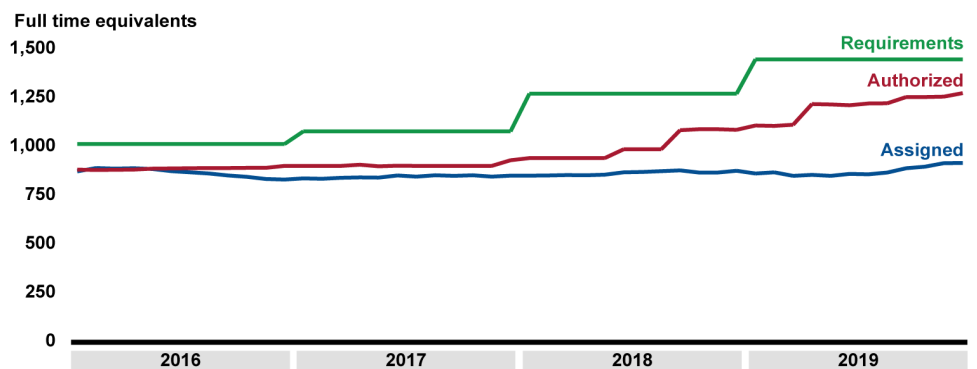
UNMANNED AERIAL SYSTEMS

Air Force Should Take Additional Steps to Improve Aircrew Staffing and Support

What GAO Found

The Air Force does not have enough pilots and sensor operators to meet its staffing targets for its unmanned aircraft—also called remotely piloted aircraft (RPA). It also does not track its overall progress in accessing and retaining enough RPA personnel needed to implement its combat-to-dwell policy, which is intended to balance RPA units' time spent in combat with non-combat activities. Officials stated that to fully implement combat-to-dwell the Air Force needs to access and retain more RPA personnel because since fiscal year 2016 it has had fewer RPA personnel than authorized (see figure for RPA sensor operator example). The Air Force has provided financial incentives to address retention of RPA personnel, but it does not yet have enough historical data to help predict RPA pilot retention trends going forward given the newness of the career field. Officials additionally expressed specific concerns about sensor operator retention particularly due to the possibility of lucrative private-sector jobs. Further, the Air Force does not have a comprehensive metric (or set of metrics) to know whether its accession and retention efforts are on track to generate the additional RPA personnel needed to implement its combat-to-dwell policy by 2024. Without a metric (or set of metrics), it is unclear whether any adjustments are needed to meet its implementation timeframes.

Number of Assigned Air Force Active-Duty Remotely Piloted Aircraft Sensor Operators Compared with Requirements and Authorized Levels, Fiscal Years 2016 through 2019



Source: GAO analysis of Air Force data. | GAO-20-320

The Air Force has not fully identified the number of RPA pilot and sensor operator instructor positions needed at its formal training unit and since 2016 has experienced instructor staffing shortages. Specifically, the number of instructor positions required is understated because they are based on a 2009 program of instruction with 49 training days while the current program of instruction is 83 training days. Moreover, since fiscal year 2016, the formal training unit has had fewer assigned instructors than authorized positions even though those numbers of instructor positions are underestimates of actual needs. To help address the effect of the instructor gap, officials temporarily reduced the length of training. Without updated information to inform the number of required instructors, the Air Force does not know the correct number of instructor positions necessary to train RPA aircrews to be ready to complete their mission.