

Military forced to lower standards once again  
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With military recruiting still struggling badly, the Pentagon wants to make it even easier for people with criminal records to join the military.

The review, in its early stages, comes as the number of Army recruits needing waivers for bad behavior — such as trying drugs, stealing, carrying weapons on school grounds and fighting — rose from 15 percent in 2006 to 18 percent this year. And it reflects the services' growing use of criminal, health and other waivers to build their ranks.

Overall, about three in every 10 recruits must get a waiver, according to Pentagon statistics obtained by AP, and about two-thirds of those approved in recent years have been for criminal behavior.

This comes as more “moral waivers” are being issued, which go to recruits with records that include aggravated assault, burglary, robbery, and vehicular homicide.

There are a variety of angles to this. First, there's the blase attitude from the right. The last time the military lowered standards, I saw one conservative blogger write, “Look at it on the bright side: If we are going to lose American soldiers fighting in Iraq I'd rather lose people with criminal records.”

Second, there are ample concerns about the effect on our fighting forces. The AP noted that a growing number of Army officers are troubled by the amount of time they now have to devote to disciplinary problems within the ranks. “And in a meeting with Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, a number of officers vigorously nodded their heads when he asked if that was a concern.” One officer told Mullen that when he was in Iraq he would spend long hours into the night dealing with “problem children.”

And third, there's the solution the Pentagon won't, or can't consider.

The military needs more volunteers, and is willing to even let recruits with criminal backgrounds sign up, but gays are still out of the question. It just doesn't make any sense.

I'm reminded of this recent piece from Aaron Belkin, director of the Michael D. Palm Center, a research institute at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Under its “don't ask, don't tell” policy, it has fired over 11,000 capable troops, including nearly 1,000 considered mission-critical and over 300 foreign linguists, just because they're gay. This despite overwhelming evidence that letting known gays serve does not impair cohesion, recruitment or effectiveness.

Yet simultaneously the military accepts those who, according to its own research and standards of review, undermine readiness by virtue of their failure to conform to society's rules.

For all its insistence that letting gays serve openly would be an unacceptable risk to the military — even if they haven't engaged in "homosexual conduct" — the Pentagon bends over backwards to create exceptions in the case of ex-convicts, whose actual criminal behavior is defined by having created a disruption. [...]

Why does the military give a free ride to those who have proven to be disruptive while it gives the axe to proven soldiers who simply happen to be gay?

I'd love to hear the answer to this question, but I don't think there is one.