1st Lt. Sydney Moskovitz, a U.S. Army Warrior Fitness Team athlete, demonstrates the hand release push-up for students at Miami Jackson Senior High School during a school visit in support of Army Recruiting and Outreach in Miami on 12 January 2022. (Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Corey Vandiver, U.S. Army Marketing and Engagement Brigade)

Did School Closures Matter for the Army's Recruiting Crisis?

Lt. Col. Brandon Colas, U.S. Army

In terms of shortfall percentages for U.S. Army, 2022 and 2023 were the worst years in recruiting since the all-volunteer force was established in 1973.[1] In each year, the Army missed its active-duty recruiting goals by about fifteen thousand soldiers. Active-duty Army recruitment met recruitment goals for fiscal year 2024 by enlisting recruits under a program that provided remedial help in education, fitness, or both.[2] The size of the Army varies from year to year depending on the budget, but historically, the Army has excelled at setting and achieving its recruiting goals for the active force. In the post 9/11-era, the Army only missed its active-duty recruiting goals in 2005 (at the beginning of the Iraq Surge) and 2018. For 2022 and 2023, however, the Army averaged only 76 percent of its goals for the active-duty force.[3] The reasons behind the recent recruiting shortfalls, as seen in figure 1 (which includes both active duty and reserve recruitment numbers), have been disputed. However, many officials have claimed that school closures hurt Army recruitment by limiting recruiter access to high school students.

This claim makes intuitive sense and was endorsed at the highest levels of the Department of Defense. For instance, in October 2024, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin released a statement commending the military for its recruitment outcomes for the previous fiscal year, adding, "We must continue to push against the ongoing headwinds in recruiting—including low unemployment and the legacies of the COVID years. We're reaching young people where they are, including in schools."[4] Secretary of the Army Christine Wormuth explained in late 2022 that recruiters were "reeling from the two-year gap in face-to-face contact with high school students during the COVID-19 pandemic."[5] During her last interview with the Associated Press in January 2025, Wormuth discussed recruitment under her tenure, and the reporter noted that "the coronavirus pandemic shut down enlistment stations and in-person recruiting in schools and at public events that the military has long relied on."[6] Dr. Agnes Gereben Schaefer, the assistant secretary of the Army for manpower and reserve affairs, provided congressional testimony in December 2023 that "COVID-19 caused lower productivity for recruiters due to loss of access to schools."[7] Uniformed officers made similar claims. In 2022, the commanding general of U.S. Army Recruitment Command, then–Maj. Gen. Johnny Davis, emphasized that during COVID, recruiters were cut off "from an entire generation" of recruits due to the "roughly two years" of school closures.[8] Lt. Gen. Maria Gervais, the deputy commander of U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, made a similar claim at a media roundtable while discussing the recruiting shortfalls, saying, "If you think about it 2+ [sic] years we haven't had the access to schools."[9]

Although these officials have all directly or indirectly stated that school closures affected U.S. military recruitment, it is not immediately clear why school access is so critical for recruitment; after all, high school students know that the military exists, whether or not they see a recruiter in their lunchroom. And secondly, not only did a considerable number of school districts keep in-person learning models throughout the pandemic school year of 2020–2021, but it was only a small proportion of districts that kept virtual learning or hybrid learning throughout the entire school year. This allows for a comparison between districts, which might allow us to answer not only whether school closures affected U.S. Army recruitment but also how much these closures actually mattered. This article seeks to estimate the extent to which changes in school format during school year 2020–2021 harmed U.S. Army recruiting by measuring the change in recruiting in different types of districts before, during, and after the pandemic.

Theory

Studies about military recruiters offer evidence that recruiters matter in enlistment but do not

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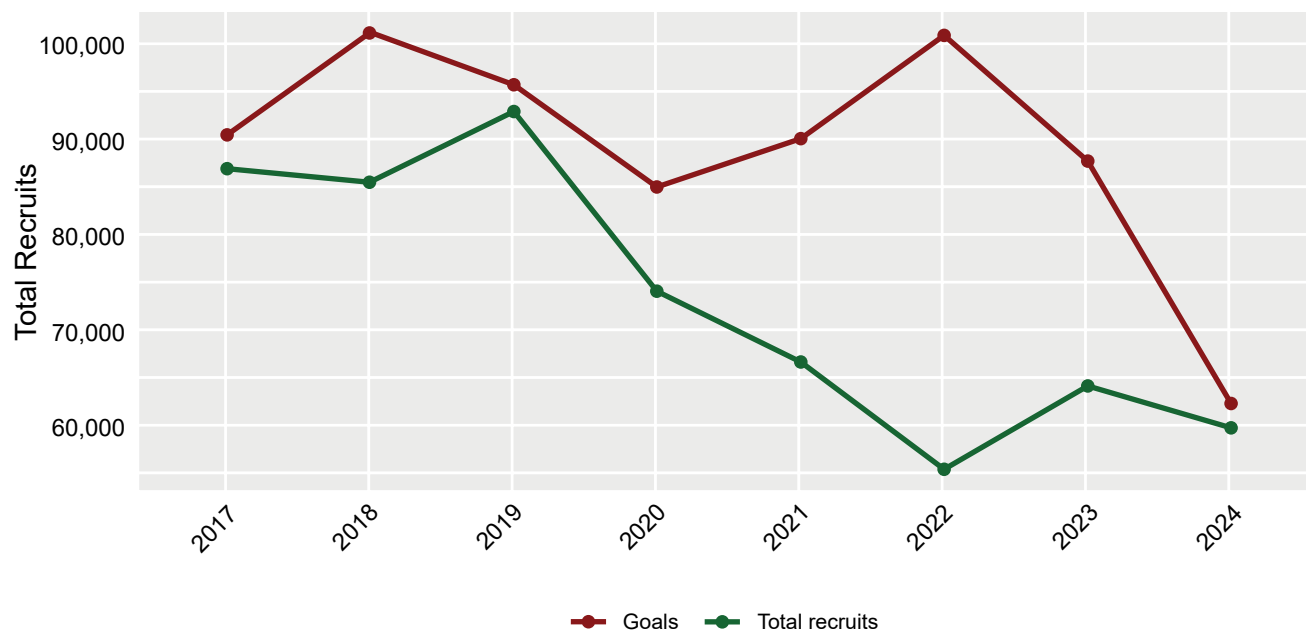
(Figure by author; data derived from U.S. Army Recruiting Command and includes both active-duty and reserve recruits)

Figure 1. Army Annual Recruitment Goals and Outcomes

generally explain why, focusing instead on quotas and incentives for recruiters.[10] Although there is considerable evidence that incentives and quotas affect recruiters' effort level, and thus incentives and quotas also affect recruitment outcomes, it is not immediately clear what "working harder" looks like, whether it be longer hours, more phone calls, or so on. An alternate way to consider why recruiters might matter for enlistment comes from studies about occupational recruitment in general, which have found that recruiters not only help individuals with finding and accepting a role in a corporation but also are critical in setting expectations for the future employee.[11] Perceptions of trustworthiness on the part of recruiters, who are organizational agents, seems to play an important role in shaping an applicants' attraction to an organization as well.[12] Further, recruiters who can provide detailed information about their employer can help make their organization appear more effective to would-be employees by demonstrating their own competence.[13]

A second way to explore how recruiters matter is to look at internal military documents that provide a baseline set of instructions and expectations

for recruiters. Based on a close reading of U.S. Army recruiter documents, including recruiting regulations, recruiting training guides (formal and informal), recruiter briefings, and web pages, recruiters matter for three reasons.[14] First, recruiters serve to help shepherd recruits through the complicated process of signing up for military service—not unlike recruiters in the civilian sector. Second, they serve as benefits managers, helping potential recruits see how the military will fulfill a particular need they have or helping a recruit's parent understand what life in the military will really be like. In this regard, they also emulate the role of civilian recruiters who are able to provide information to would-be employees: some specific questions about future employment are best answered by someone who is on the inside. But the third role of military recruiters does not have a direct civilian analogy in the employment realm, because military recruiters also serve as mobilizing agents for the state. Enlistment in the military is a political act because recruits are committing themselves to defending the state. But this does not mean that enlistment is, or should be, related to partisan identity. Indeed, recruiters help provide recruits

with a sense of social identity, enabling their vision of themselves as future service members.[15]

I suggest that this third role as a mobilizing agent for the state is one uniquely suited to in-person engagement. Much of the bureaucratic wrangling takes place behind the scenes; a recruit will be told when to show up at an appointment, but it is the recruiter working in the background to ensure that the right exams take place at the right times. Similarly, the promise of military benefits can often be explored by the recruits themselves on official Army websites or perhaps Reddit boards, and even if a would-be recruit might not know of a particular bonus program suitable for them, there is no inherent reason why such knowledge could not be readily provided via phone or email as the recruiter seeks to influence their decision to join. But the latent sense of identity is different. How credible would a recruiter's assurances about a recruit's likelihood of future military success really be if the recruiter never actually met with them in person? In short, senior leaders' claims about school closures harming recruiting seem inherently credible in part because those of us who have chosen the profession of service in the military understand that, regardless of the length of time served and regardless of the underlying motivations for service, joining the military is a choice that very few people make lightly. Having in-person access to someone currently serving, namely the recruiter, makes logical sense for making enlistment more likely.

The recruiter as a mobilizing agent. In-person engagement with recruiters might make intuitive sense—having a positive relationship will lead to positive recruitment outcomes—but it requires a close look at recruitment literature to see this relationship. This gap in explanation might be because recruiters are presumed to be functioning as salespeople. But according to the U.S. Army's "how-to" manual— U.S. Army Recruiting Command Training Circular 5-03.1, *Prospecting, Processing, and Analysis*—the "Recruiting Funnel" (which comprises three steps: prospecting, the Army interview, and processing) is not merely a filter with which would-be recruits may realize that the Army is not for them or the Army may realize that a would-be recruit is not suitable for service.[16] It can also be seen as a staircase: as the process continues, the recruiter does not simply convince the individual of the benefits of service but also fosters a

particular civic identity in the recruit that convinces the recruit that they can serve as a future soldier. It is this identity building, I argue, that uniquely benefits from in-person engagement.

One example of how recruiters are trained to use in-person engagement comes from contact scripts, mentioned in Training Circular 5-03.1. These scripts provide insight into what the U.S. Army believes are primary motivations to recruits and imply that the recruiter can develop a *social* identity in would-be recruits. For instance, the description of how a recruiter can use leading questions to help interest a recruit who wants to join based on a motivation of service to the country consists of two examples:

- "Billy, do you consider yourself patriotic?"
- "Lisa, how do you feel when you see someone burning the American Flag?"[17]

Note that both ("patriotic" and "opposed to flag-burning") are a form of direct social identity and are directly suggested as a means to generate an enlistment. Granted, other suggested contact scripts do focus on other benefits of service (including occupational, leadership, income, excitement, and respect).[18] But the point is that recruiters are encouraged to push both extrinsic (what their country can do for them) and intrinsic (what they can do for their country) motivations for would-be recruits. This is why recruiters are not just facilitators and salespeople but also mobilizing actors who can help create civic identity in a subgroup of the state's population. New recruits do not only sign a contract but take an oath as well.[19]

These Army manuals that demonstrate both types of motivation for enlistment—benefits to oneself but also seeking to benefit one's country—have been reflected in previous studies. David Segal, for instance, suggests that the military and its members are motivated by both occupational and institutional features, contrary to previous work that suggested a volunteer force would lean more heavily toward occupational motivation for enlistment.[20] John Eighmey, relying on various Department of Defense Youth Polls, suggests that seven underlying themes exist that explain why individuals enlist. Eighmey's data suggests that value-driven themes, more than material benefits, tend to drive enlistment decisions.[21] A third example of an effort to survey enlistment motivation from 2006 came in Todd Woodruff, Ryan Kelty, and David Segal's

"Propensity to Serve and Motivation to Enlist Among American Combat Soldiers." Woodruff, Kelty, and Segal were able to survey two battalions of infantryman from Fort Lewis with a goal to focus on first-term soldiers from both battalions. They find that those who had a higher propensity for service were motivated more by patriotism and plans for the future, whereas low-propensity soldiers expressed motivation in terms of occupation and finance.[22]

School closures can open the black box of recruiter techniques. If the recruiter is thought of as a mobilizing agent, it is entirely plausible that a lack of high school access would subsequently damage recruitment. Individuals who enlist do so, at least in part, by developing an identity that enables them to have enough confidence in themselves to enter the challenges of basic training, with all the stress—physical, mental, and emotional—that it entails. Those who are willing to enter that training have done so, whether in small or large part, thanks to a recruiter who has mediated between the recruit and the bureaucracy required for enlistment, as well as helping the recruit develop a new identity as a future soldier. Based on the belief that recruiters can help activate recruits' civic identities, this study will test whether recruiter access, or lack of access, in school districts impacted recruiting. Rather than explaining recruiter success or failure as the outcome of recruiter motivation, this study looks to explore how one particular tool of the recruiter—access to high schools, which is a legal obligation for schools—shapes recruiter outcomes.[23]

Data

The puzzle. It seems reasonable to believe that if recruiters lost the chance to have in-person engagement with potential recruits, it would harm recruiting. Numerous senior officials have claimed directly that school closures during the pandemic meant that recruiters lost access to high school students. However, this claim by senior officials needs careful contextualization.

The claim that school closures hurt recruitment needs to be contextualized because there were numerous school districts that stayed open for in-person learning throughout the pandemic. The number of districts that were *only* offering virtual learning to their students during school year 2020–2021 was relatively few, although a majority of districts offered a blend of hybrid and virtual learning for that pandemic school year. In fact, during the pandemic, there were four types of districts: only in-person, only hybrid, only virtual, and some mix of the above. In short, we should expect that recruiters in some states, such as Florida, which stayed open throughout 2020–2021, had considerably more access to engage with high school students than recruiters in California, in which nearly all districts were some blend of virtual and hybrid.

Besides the wide heterogeneity across districts and between states in school learning models, on-campus school visits are not the only way in which recruiters "access" high schoolers. School districts are legally required to offer the same access to recruiters that they do to colleges, and although sometimes school districts are not supportive of recruiters, at a minimum, this access usually means that recruiters will receive names, addresses, phone numbers, and emails of students (juniors, seniors, or both). If recruiters still had contact information for students, they ought to have been able to reach out to them (or their parents) regardless of the pandemic situation.

Besides the facts that recruiters had alternate ways to reach recruits and many schools stayed open for in-person learning during school year 2020–2021, it is not clear why recruiters could not adapt to their local conditions even if schools were closed to visits. If a school district was only offering virtual learning, why couldn't a recruiter participate as a guest speaker or be able to set up a separate counseling session for interested students just like a college admissions counselor might? Although the U.S. Army Recruiting Command shifted its recruiting operations to virtual in March 2020, it allowed for in-person recruiting, depending on the conditions, in May 2020, which suggests that by school year 2020–2021, recruiters should have had options to communicate with high school recruits.[24]

State selection. For this study, I selected the top quartile of states for Army recruitment based on their average annual recruitment numbers from 2002 to 2021. I chose the 2021 cutoff because the collapse in 2022 may have distorted the ranking of states. Using the average recruitment numbers up to that point should give a strong indicator of what states mattered the most for the post-9/11 Army, prior to the pandemic.[25] On

average, during the years 2002 to 2021, relatively few states contributed the bulk of Army recruiting from year to year. The states in the top two quartiles contribute almost 85 percent of the mean annual recruitment, and the states of Texas, California, Florida, Georgia, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Illinois, Virginia, Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Arizona, which I use as my sample, provide well over half of the mean annual recruitment (see table 1).

Department of Defense data. The Department of Defense's Defense Management Data Center provided accessions data for each active-duty Army recruit in the fiscal years 2018 through 2023. This information included the recruit's age, home zip code, and entry date into the U.S. Army. I filtered these data to only include those who enlisted at the age of seventeen or eighteen to allow for high school students or very recent graduates.[26]

COVID-19 School Data Hub. The COVID-19 School Data Hub provided information about the share of time spent in each form of learning (in-person, hybrid, or virtual) for the school districts in our states of interest.[27] I used these data to make two sets of models. For the first set of models, I selected only districts that offered in-person learning or virtual learning of hybrid learning for more than 95 percent of school year 2020–2021. For the second set of models, I look at four district types: those with in-person learning for more than 95 percent for school year 2020–2021, those that were hybrid for more than 95 percent for school year 2020–2021, those that went virtual for more than 95 percent for school year 2020–2021, and those that had some other combination of learning for the pandemic school year.

Combining the data. Finally, to estimate which recruits went into which school districts, I grouped individual recruits by their zip code into school districts (which usually encompass multiple zip codes). I used a crosswalk from the National Center for Educational Statistics for this step, which used areal weighting of each zip code for each school district.[28] As a robustness check, I also plotted the centroid of each recruit's zip code directly into the school district geography (which would then just assume that whichever school district had the "most" area of that zip code would get full credit for the recruit), and my results were substantively the same.

Table 1. Army Active-Duty Recruitment by State 2002–2021

State	Annual Average	Percentage
Texas	7,501	11.10
California	7,097	10.50
Florida	5,291	7.80
Georgia	3,043	4.50
New York	3,020	4.50
North Carolina	2,805	4.10
Ohio	2,397	3.50
Illinois	2,261	3.30
Virginia	2,190	3.20
Pennsylvania	1,996	2.90
Michigan	1,806	2.70
Arizona	1,790	2.60
Total	**41,197**	**60.7%**

(Table by author)

Results

How many districts were closed during school year 2020–2021? First, table 2 helps explain one way of grouping my dataset. The table differentiates school districts by a very simple measure: if the school district was in-person for 95 percent of the 2020–2021 school or more, it is considered in-person, and if the school district was in-person for 5 percent of the 2020–2021 school year or less, it is considered not in-person. (I realize that is slightly overstating the case since hybrid schooling models did have some time in-person. I thought about using the terms "conventional learning" and "unconventional learning" instead but felt that was also confusing.) One important note from table 2 is that even though the district counts and estimates of total youth in the districts were different, the overall number of enlistments for both districts was roughly the same in school year 2020–2021. Table 3 goes further back in time as well, showing that at least in terms of total enlistments prior to the pandemic, these districts seem to be fairly well balanced.

Another way to look at these data is to consider each district's pandemic learning model in somewhat

Table 2. School Year 2020–2021 (Pandemic) Enlistments by Binary Closure Category

Closure Category	Total Enlistments	Total Youth	District Count
In-Person	3,781	3,221,299	1,568
Not In-Person	3,869	5,228,964	1,740

(Table by author)

Table 3. Pandemic Enlistments by Binary Closure Category Across Years

Closure Category	Total Enlistments	Percent Change from Previous Year
2018–2019		
In-Person	5,997	NA
Not In-Person	6,398	NA
2019–2020		
In-Person	4,860	-19
Not In-Person	5,080	-21
2020–2021		
In-Person	3,781	-22
Not In-Person	3,869	-24
2021–2022		
In-Person	3,169	-16
Not In-Person	3,145	-19

(Table by author)

more detail as depicted in table 4. Here, districts are classified as "in-person" (in-person for 95 percent or more for school year 2020–2021), "hybrid" (hybrid for 95 percent or more for school year 2020–2021), "virtual" (virtual for 95 percent or more for school year 2020–2021), or "other" (some other combination for school year 2020–2021, e.g., 50 percent hybrid, 10 percent virtual, and 40 percent in-person). This table is important in part because it shows that there were relatively few districts in this sample that chose to completely shut down the school by only offering virtual learning to students. In fact, of all the districts in the sample, 28 percent were fully in-person, compared to 10 percent that were fully hybrid and 9.5 percent that were fully virtual. This does not, of course, mean that even learning in the in-person districts did not have some constraints or disruptions. But it does mean that there is considerable heterogeneity among school districts—enough, I believe, to compare them and draw some tentative conclusions about the effect of pandemic schooling, however it looked, on recruitment.

What were recruiting outcomes in in-person versus not-in-person districts before, during, and after the pandemic? My next approach to looking at these data was to take the district groupings, based on district behavior during the pandemic, and measure recruitment trends before, during, and after the pandemic. In other words, even though the not-in-person districts

did actually offer in-person learning prior to the pandemic, and after the pandemic, I label them as "not-in person" for school years 2018–2019 and 2019–2020 (when they were in fact *actually* in-person) and also for school years 2020–2021 (when they were *actually* not in-person) and 2021–2022 (when they were again *actually* in person). Thus, the school district's choice during the pandemic categorizes the school so that we can compare both types of districts in a reasonable way. By labeling the districts as such, we can see the direction of their pre-pandemic (and post-pandemic) recruitment trends. In other words, suppose that the in-person districts had flat recruitment prior to the pandemic

Table 4. School Year 2020–2021 (Pandemic) Enlistments by School District Type

District Type	Total Enlistments	Total Youth	District Count
In-Person	3,781	3,221,299	1,568
Hybrid	579	711,926	473
Virtual	542	877,845	147
Other	5,779	7,109,603	3,499

(Table by author)

and then suddenly jumped after the pandemic, while the not-in-person districts also had flat recruitment prior to the pandemic and then collapsed afterward; this would be strong evidence that the pandemic school closures did harm recruitment.

Here I provide both table 3 and figure 2. Figure 2 does appear to show a slight improvement in recruitment outcomes for in-person districts over not-in-person districts in school year after the pandemic, 2021–2022. However, if we use the count of recruits from table 3 to assess the difference between both types of districts, we can see that the count is marginal.

The percentage change from the previous year is important to note because it highlights what is in figure 2: there has been a steady decline of seventeen-to-eighteen-year-old recruits into the Army, and it began before the pandemic. The year-to-year losses were different, and in school year 2021–2022 were indeed higher for the districts that did not maintain in-person learning. However, these differences were also not substantively significant: in-person districts saw their recruits decline by 16 percentage points the year after the pandemic, and not-in-person districts had a loss of 19 percentage points. Similarly, if we are to just compare the losses between school years 2018–2019 and 2021–2022, the in-person districts had a loss of 47 percent. The not-in-person districts had a loss of 51 percent. My point here is that school closures seem to have had a marginal effect on recruiting compared to the decline, year over year, in the number of enlistments of seventeen-to-eighteen-year-old prospects.

What were recruiting outcomes in in-person versus virtual versus hybrid districts before and after the pandemic? In table 3, I showed that although there

were differences in relative losses of recruits from two types of districts following the pandemic. In-person districts were better, not-in-person districts were worse. But of course, the problem is that in absolute terms, the losses were about the same. The in-person districts lost 612 recruits in the year after pandemic schooling (2021–2022) compared to the year of the pandemic (2020–2021). The not-in-person districts lost 724 recruits. The difference of 112 recruits is a rounding error for an Army attempting to enlist about fifty-five thousand a year. (And if we remember that I am using about 60 percent of the annual recruitment pool for my sample, we would estimate a difference of under two hundred recruits between these types of districts nationwide.)

A second way to assess the data is to group the districts into the previously mentioned four types: in-person, hybrid, virtual, and other. Table 5 shows these differences. Here, I highlight that the "virtual" districts did seem to have a steep drop from 2019–2020 to 2020–2021, a loss of 242 recruits, or about 31 percent. But in substantive terms, this type of district was already recruiting relatively few recruits, considerably fewer than the in-person or other districts. The much worse loss came from the in-person districts that dropped 22 percentage points but had a loss of 1,079 recruits comparing the year before pandemic schooling (2019–2020) and the year of pandemic schooling. Figure 3 shows the trends.

Summary of data. The combination of figures 2 and 3 as well as tables 3 and 5 shows that claims that school closures harmed recruitment need considerable nuance. Granted, my work is based on estimates and assumptions; although I have exact recruit counts, I am

Total Recruits by Year and School Closure Category

School District Type ─●─ In-Person (> 95%) ─●─ Not In-Person (Hybrid or Virtual [> 95%])
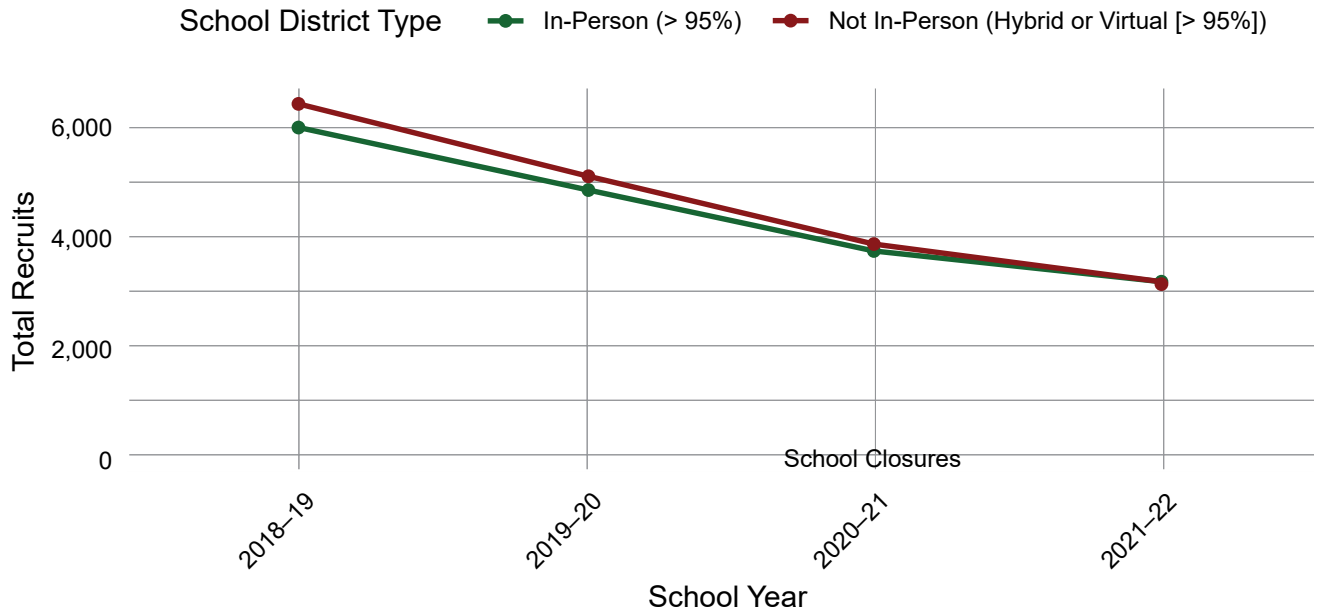
(Figure by author; data derived from Defense Management Data Center and COVID-19 School Data Hub; learning model based on 2020–21 school year)

Figure 2. Recruitment Trends Over Time for In-Person and Not-In-Person Districts

Total Recruits by Year and School Closure Category

Closure Category ─●─ Other ─●─ In-Person (> 95%) ─●─ Virtual (> 95%) ─●─ Hybrid (> 95%)
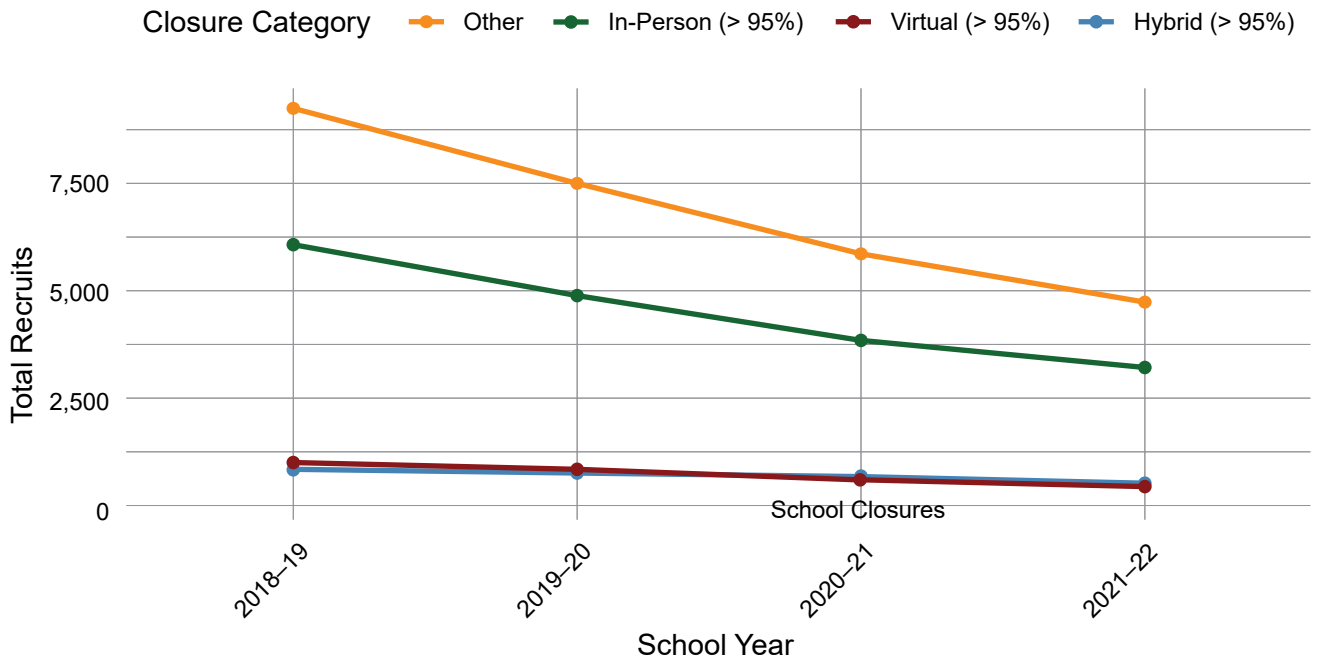
(Figure by author; derived from data from the Defense Management Data Center and COVID–19 School Data Hub; learning model based on 2020–21 school year)

Figure 3. Recruitment Trends Over Time for Four Types of Districts

estimating which school district they came from as well as assuming that they attended school in that district (rather than, say, a private school); although I know which districts conducted which types of learning during school year 2020–2021, I am assuming that "open" school districts would have been more likely to permit recruiter visits; and, of course, I am also assuming that recruiters still *tried* to visit schools (regardless of the type of district). Although these assumptions are imperfect, I argue that if school closures really did have adverse effects on recruitment outcomes, we should be able to see *much* more significant differences in these data.

Conclusions

This study has suggested that claims that school closures hurt recruiting may be incorrect because they fail to account for particular aspects of the recruiting crisis. First, not all schools were closed during the pandemic. Second, even with school closures, recruiters still had alternate means to contact would-be recruits (such as contact lists). Finally, recruiters ought to, in theory, have had alternate means to communicate with students through local school districts, even for districts that were fully virtual, for instance, by communicating with guidance counselors and district officials to explain the importance of *some* sort of access. My estimate based on recruits' home zip code and local school district boundaries suggests that there was relatively little difference during or after the pandemic between in-person and not-in-person districts in terms of recruitment outcomes.

It does make intuitive sense that school closures would matter. Although Army recruitment has much in common with other marketing endeavors (such

Table 5. Pandemic Enlistments by District Type Over Time

Closure Category	Total Enlistments	Percent Change from Previous Year
2018–2019		
In-Person	5,997	NA
Hybrid	817	NA
Virtual	954	NA
Other	9,287	NA
2019–2020		
In-Person	4,860	-19
Hybrid	717	-12
Virtual	784	-18
Other	7,547	-19
2020–2021		
In-Person	3,781	-22
Hybrid	579	-19
Virtual	542	-31
Other	5,779	-23
2021–2022		
In-Person	3,169	-16
Hybrid	476	-18
Virtual	447	-22
Other	4,708	-19

(Table by author)

as choosing one's college), asking someone to possibly put their life on the country probably is best done in a recruiter-recruit, in-person relationship rather than a virtual connection. The COVID-19 pandemic affected many aspects of our lives: it is wholly reasonable to believe that it would affect Army recruitment as well. The problem, however, is that this simple metric—how many recruits were enlisting and from what school district types, before and after the pandemic—does not indicate a substantive difference between these different district types. These data strongly suggest that school closures themselves are unlikely to have played a significant role in the recruiting crisis. Although Army

recruiting is currently doing well, it is worthwhile spending time and effort to understand the root causes of the recruiting crisis. My hope is that this study can both challenge conventional wisdom and serve as a model for similar studies in the future that make use of modern data science tools and the rich datasets available to the military to understand the factors that did, and did not, matter during the recruiting crisis. ∎

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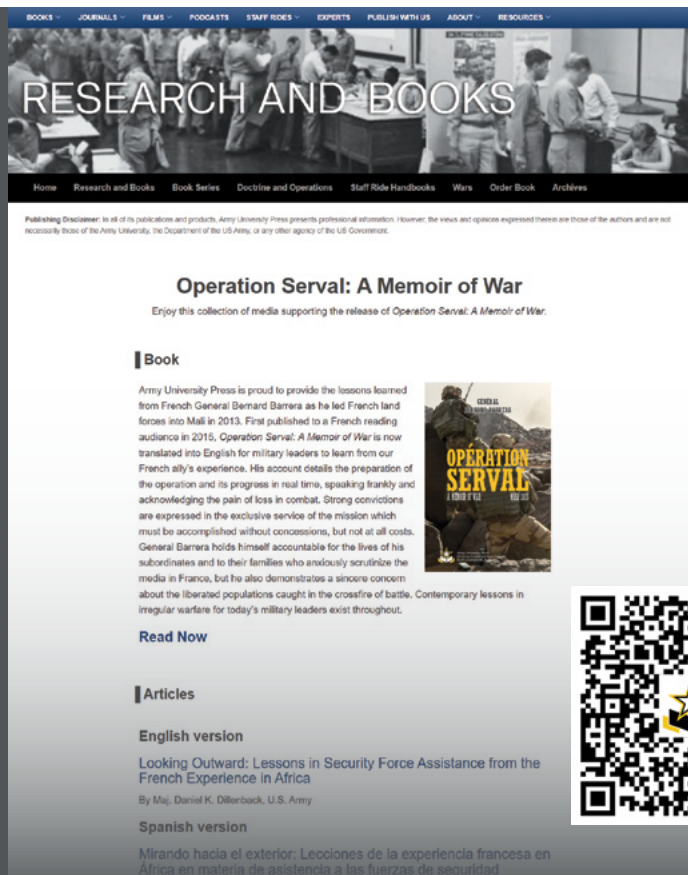
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