

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-22-105676](#), a report to congressional committees

## Why GAO Did This Study

The House Committee on Armed Services and the military services have acknowledged recent challenges in recruiting, which they have attributed to a number of social and economic factors. Tattoo prevalence among American youth has increased, and Congress has expressed interest in the effect the armed forces' tattoo policies have on recruitment and retention.

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022 includes a provision for GAO to review the armed forces' tattoo policies. GAO examined the extent to which (1) tattoo policies exist for potential and current members of the armed forces, (2) the armed forces assess any effects of their tattoo policies on recruitment and retention of members, and (3) the armed forces have waiver processes for unauthorized tattoos.

GAO included the Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force, and Space Force within the Department of Defense (DOD), and the Coast Guard within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). GAO analyzed their tattoo policies for potential recruits and current service members, including enlisted personnel and officers.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that each of the six armed forces updates its tattoo policy, as appropriate, to better ensure that it clearly documents whether waivers are available for recruits and service members; and provides clear guidance on eligible tattoos and requirements for requesting a waiver, among other things. DOD and the military services generally agreed, and DHS agreed, with the recommendations.

View [GAO-22-105676](#). For more information, contact Brenda S. Farrell at (202) 512-3604 or [FarrellB@gao.gov](mailto:FarrellB@gao.gov).

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## MILITARY PERSONNEL

### Armed Forces Should Clarify Tattoo Policies' Waiver Guidance

#### What GAO Found

The armed forces' policies for tattoo permissions and restrictions all focus on the content, size, and location of allowable tattoos. While the armed forces have content prohibitions for tattoos, the policies have evolved and become less restrictive regarding size and location. The current policies permit tattoos almost anywhere on the body except for on the head and face.

#### Navy Service Member with Allowable Tattoos



Source: U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class R. McFarlane. | GAO-22-105676

Armed forces officials GAO interviewed stated that recruiting and retention data do not include tattoo-specific data or other information that would allow an assessment of whether tattoo policies have a direct effect on recruitment and retention. Officials stated that tattoo policy updates are based on general discussions and on limited assessments of tattoo-related information, such as studies on tattoo prevalence among youth.

Most armed forces allow waivers (i.e., exceptions) for certain unauthorized tattoos, usually related to their size or location, for recruits and service members. Although each of the armed forces allows waivers for certain tattoo restrictions for recruits, the policies do not always mention or provide clear guidance on the requirements for these waivers. In addition, each armed force, except for the Navy, allows waivers for certain tattoo restrictions for service members, but their respective policies generally do not document this possibility clearly. Clear guidance on waivers for unauthorized tattoos would provide consistent information about requirements for waiver requests and conditions for approval. This could clarify whether tattoo prevalence affects future or continued military service.