



# RESEARCH SUMMARY

## The Impact of Removing Demographic Indicators from Military Promotion Boards

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 called for a study to assess the potential impact of removing data that identifies race, ethnicity and gender from promotion boards. The Office of the Secretary of Defense asked the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA) to conduct this study.

A team of IDA researchers deployed a mixed-methods analytic approach centered on three research questions:

- Effectiveness: Is there sufficient evidence that removing indicators of race/ethnicity and gender will reduce bias or improve selection outcomes?
- Feasibility: Is it possible to remove all indicators that may reflect race/ethnicity and gender given available resources?
- Prioritization: Are there more viable or impactful strategies to reduce the potential for bias?

To assess the potential efficacy of removing demographic indicators, IDA analyzed historical officer promotion data for the Air Force, Army, Marine Corps and Navy. Specifically, IDA examined the impact of past policy changes that partially removed demographic indicators (such as a candidate photo or minority designator) on minority officer promotion rates. After controlling for rank, year, competitive category and linear time trends, IDA found that the policy changes examined did not significantly impact promotion rates for minority officers

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relative to non-minority officers. Additionally, IDA examined how names indicative of minority status predict promotion outcomes, finding no significant associations between name and promotion.

After reviewing policy and speaking with staff responsible for policy and execution of military selection boards, IDA concluded that the feasibility of removing identifying information is very low. Doing so would involve manual redaction of millions of records across multiple decades, quality-review processes and new systems to store redacted content. Even without demographic indicators, race/ethnicity and gender could be inferred from career history and assignments, such as to combat roles before service was open to women, and could be directly stated in candidates' letters to the board.

Given the lack of evidence for the efficacy of removing demographic indicators from records and the low feasibility of doing so, IDA examined strategies that could be more fruitful for action based on a literature review and discussions with promotion board members. IDA found that promotion boards have already adopted many best practices to mitigate bias. However, there are several domains in which the military departments could better align their procedures with evidence-based practices. IDA recommended options to further standardize board processes, for example:

- Augment training for board members by lengthening or adding practice evaluation sessions and improving preparation to evaluate different career fields.
- Extend time for review of promotion files by limiting the number of records reviewed each day, convening smaller boards, or omitting non-essential information from files.

- Add structure to Navy and Marine Corps briefing processes by standardizing guidance on briefing and discussion and omitting discussion of scores and grades assigned to candidates.

In discussions with the IDA team, board members noted that racial/ethnic and gender disparities may arise earlier in the career process through differential access to key developmental experiences and ineffective or unfair performance evaluations. As such, IDA recommended that the DOD and the military departments continue to examine career milestones and outcomes that impact competitiveness for promotion. For example, the DOD could study the extent to which performance evaluations are subject to bias and provide additional training to minimize bias and improve written communication and objectivity.

This summary is based on [IDA Paper P-33193](#).



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