

Drowning Out Success

A case for reviewing African American recruit training attrition rates

by LtCol Brian J. Wilson

An inspection of recruit training completion data revealed that African Americans have failed at a significantly higher rate than the overall average. An unsuccessful attempt to confirm a related hypothesis on the swimming success of African Americans exposed the substantial variation. The disparity in success was concealed by a deficiency in the analysis phase of the accessions model. That obscuration prevented recognition of the problem, understanding of contributing factors, or the implementation of corrective actions. The imprecise recordation of vital data masked a correlation between socioeconomics and success. As such, questions have been raised on the effectiveness of the relationship among Marine Corps recruiting, entry-level training, and talent management.

In an interview following his February 2020 testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee, Commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen David Berger said, “We will get smaller in order to get better.” His remark echoed the sweeping changes underway in response to his 2019 *Commandant’s Planning Guidance*, which served as a “road map describing where the Marine Corps is going and why; what the Marine Corps force development priorities are and are not; and ... how and when prescribed actions will be implemented.”¹ The now-slimming Marine Corps reprioritized quality and capability over quantity to address a manpower system that, “was designed in the industrial era to produce mass, not quality.”² Doing so shifted the conversation to trimming the force and optimizing those who remained.

To that end, the Corps has used non-traditional and more targeted

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approaches to address specific needs through recruitment. Marine recruiting is marketing and engaging in the arena of electronic sports for the first time and actively pursuing cyber professionals. There has even been consideration given to raising the qualifying general technical scores for certain occupational fields. Based on legacy approaches and CMC intent, a more targeted effort to recruitment has also been directed at minority populations. In comments at the 2020 Modern Day Marine expo, Gen David Berger said, “I am absolutely convinced: too much similarity—too much that we look all the same, think the same, got the same background—we’re going to get killed because we’re going to end up with solutions that we’re all familiar with.” He went on to emphasize the point saying, “This is without question scientifically proven: The best organizations are diverse.”³ His sentiments signaled a Corps seeking minorities, as categorized when compared to the near 75 percent white male majority that makes up the Service. With African Americans representing an obvious target demographic to meet that desire, the Marine Corps’ execution of the next steps in the attainment process is critically important. Those next steps include active recruitment, securing of commitments, and the indoctrination of the most qualified people within targeted minority populations.

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Where This Started

A 1971 *Ebony* magazine article described Atlanta, GA, as the *Black Mecca of the South* because of the regional opportunities for, and prosperity of, African Americans, which led to an influx of new minority residents.⁴ The name was fitting and is still used as it remains accurate today. The city of Atlanta is comprised of more than 50 percent African Americans and, when including the surrounding suburbs, the region ranks amongst the top five highest Africa American populations in America. Three years in command of Marine Corps Recruiting Station (RS) Atlanta, GA, taught me a myriad of lessons about the African American community of which I am a member of. Daily, I stood at the Rubicon between the Corps and America—at the confluence of ideas, initiatives, concepts, and capabilities—as I represented the Marine Corps’ effort to gain young men and women from the state of Georgia.

In that role, I saw the disproportionate and negative effect of Marine Corps recruit training swim failures on African Americans attempting to enter the Corps from the South’s “Mecca.” Those negative impacts were ampli-

fied in Recruiting Substations (RSS) servicing areas with exceptionally high concentrations of African Americans. In 2019, three RSSs that operated in the African American population centers of Southwest Atlanta and DeKalb County, Georgia—an eastern suburb of Atlanta—had more than 50 percent of their recruit training attrition attributed to failure of swim qualification.⁵ I was concerned that a similar disproportionate impact was being duplicated across the Nation. If correct, that scenario would have had major implications on the overall African American enlisted population of the Marine Corps. Furthermore, there was a reinvigoration of the maritime roots and naval initiatives of the Service as outlined in documents such as *Advantage at Sea*, the *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance*, and the *Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advance Base Operations*. An elevation of importance of the often obligatory and ancillary water survival proficiency requirements was sure to quickly follow. I feared, that if my premise was correct, African Americans would be left behind at a higher rate in the race to create a more full-spectrum, maritime-capable force.

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Beginning Disguised as End

From a request sent to the Marine Corps Recruiting Command (MCRC) Enlisted Operations Branch, I received roughly processed, near raw, fiscal year 2016 through 2020 recruit training attrition data.⁶ That data included ship date, graduation or discharge date, generalized discharge reason, race, and sex for every person who arrived at both Recruit Training Depots during the five-year period. In reviewing that data, I encountered larger and more concerning potentials than the hypothesis I was

seeking to confirm. I reached a wall of sorts but found a door in that wall that opened into a labyrinth of unfortunate possibilities.

I immediately identified an anomaly in the graduation rates of African American recruits versus those of white recruits. Aided by a Defense Systems Analyst and a Master's in Business Administration (Business Analytics) candidate, I subsequently characterized that anomaly as a *statistically significant difference*.⁷ A statistically significant difference is an analytics term roughly meaning a result that has a negligible probability of being caused by chance.⁸ That mattered because if a result was not due chance, then it had a cause or causes that, if properly understood, could be influenced to change the result.

Beyond the identified statistical difference, equally troubling was the show-stopping barrier encountered when attempting to gain data on swim failures delineated by race. Though the data included race as a characteristic, the level of detail for failure and subsequent discharge was too vague to conduct human capital analysis. The discharge coding methodology was grossly generic. Code JGA1—an entry-level performance and conduct discharge—accounted for 44 percent of the sample timeframe recruit training failures. That category alone included swim failures as well as more than ten other reasons for discharge. Even with that void of details, it was obvious that African Americans—a demographic historically plagued by low swimming proficiency—were failing Marine Corps recruit training at a higher rate than white recruits. Based on my personal experience commanding a RS, I believed those two factors were closely related. Unfortunately, my ability to verify the linkage was stifled by ambiguous data.

There was no information on the race of swim failures at recruit training collated within the Marine Corps' central recruiting data collection entity, the Marine Corps Recruiting Information Support System. Specifics on why someone failed at recruit training, be it swimming or otherwise, beyond the vague coding, was only being consolidated at the RS-level throughout the

Nation. That consolidation required the tedious and unreasonable process of individually reviewing the notes of each discharged recruit's paperwork. Regardless, any data that was collected had not been forwarded to any higher headquarters. No commander or staff, outside of the RSs, had the ability to analyze the effects of swim failures, or any other systemic issue, on any demographic; thus, no Service-level common operating picture existed.⁹ Every time I have repeated this finding since learning it, I have been met with near contemptuous disbelief escorted by contorted faces and inflected tones—as if I must be mistaken. Sadly, I am not. There is currently a large gap in the fundamental method of assessment. Not only has the Marine Corps yet to identify the cause for the variance in the African American success rate, there seems to be no recognition that the inconsistency actually exists. To that vein, the real question is: Where was the rhythm of analysis that would have exposed the inexplicit data and corrected the collection method?

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The Impact on "Us"

In the last five years, 90 in 100 recruits who attempted recruit training were successful. White recruits graduated at that rate. For African Americans, only 87 in 100 succeeded. That equated to 12.5 percent African American attrition versus 9.6 percent white attrition. While three failures in 100 may seem insignificant, during the last five years, just over 17,000 African Americans became enlisted Marines. Those three people account for 565 African Americans who started the journey to being Marines but never

succeeded. 500-plus people represent a 3 percent negative deviation from the possible African American population growth. With an African American population historically hovering near 10 percent of the approximate 185,000 member Marine Corps, that deviation from average is significant. A 90 percent effectiveness in “making Marines” has camouflaged a negative result on the principal supplier of diversity to the Marine Corps—African Americans. The Corps has been victimized by compliancy, with the perceived success of the whole, drowning out the disproportionate struggling of the chief minority populace.

Additionally, one in every 108 enlisted Marines achieves the highest enlisted pay grade of E-9 and the rank of sergeant major or master gunnery sergeant. That feat takes approximately twenty years and accounts for a population that is less than one percent of the Service. Through that lens, those 565 recruit training failures represent five African American sergeants major or master gunnery sergeants—the pinnacle of enlisted professionalism, proficiency, and influence—who will not exist in the 2036–40 Marine Corps.¹⁰ Unfortunately, that fact cannot be changed at this point, but fully understanding how it occurred is vital.

Hushed Facts

The common but quietly spoken stereotypes centered on “black people cannot/do not swim” are statistically anchored by facts. African Americans have the lowest rate of swimming proficiency in the Nation at only 69 percent versus whites, who lead the nation at 84 percent.¹¹ More alarming, only 34 percent of African American children, ages 4 to 18, can swim. That fact fuels an African American youth drowning fatality rate nearly four times that of white children.¹² There are many commonly accepted and deeply complex theories on why African American swimming proficiency is low. The most relevant dynamic to this topic in many of those probable theories is the interplay of economic inequality and swimming proficiency.

That factor of economics should

particularly interest Marine Corps leadership. While the swimming woes of African Americans can often be viewed as a “black” problem, the Marine Corps must avoid a trap in that logic. Swimming proficiency in America is a tale of socioeconomics: 79 percent of children in households with an annual income of less than \$50,000 will reach adulthood as non-swimmers, and 76 percent of children who qualify for free or reduced lunch programs are non-swimmers.¹³ The national median household income is \$62,843. However, three of the five United States Census racial categories that the Marine Corps would con-

Swimming proficiency in America is a tale of socioeconomics ...

sider minorities sit near or below the \$50,000 annual household income threshold. African American, Hispanic/Latino, and American Indian/Native Alaskan households earn approximately \$42,000, \$51,000, and \$43,000, respectively. In other words, 31 percent of households in America and 87 percent of the households representative of the Marine Corps’ targeted demographics in recruiting racial diversity, earn near or below a significant economic indicator for swimming proficiency.¹⁴ Additionally, 51 percent of American children receiving free or reduced lunch are racial minorities.¹⁵ Is the Marine Corps executing the entry-level swim qualification program in a manner that accounts for the vast majority in the targeted minority demographics being non-swimmers?

Of greater consequence, 35 percent of white households—the primary source of Marine Corps enlistments—earn less than \$50,000.¹⁶ That statistic makes the dialog less about the impact on minority recruitment but rather a conversation about the impact on the entire recruited population. The Marine Corps must recognize

the growing impact of economics on youth swimming proficiency levels and evolve or become victims of a stale approach.

Publicized desires and the means to those ends must be aligned and exude sincerity.

Tomorrow Provides a Chance

MCRC must immediately aggregate disparate data and analyze that data to identify the causal factors behind higher African American attrition at recruit training. Challenges and opportunities must be recognized, and aggressive, consequential, and comprehensive steps implemented to create positive results. A Marine Corps Studies System project executed by the Operations Analysis Directorate or a Naval Research Project executed by the Naval Postgraduate School provide avenues to explore this topic. A study performed by either organization would utilize a highly specialized apparatus designed explicitly to identify alternatives in pursuit of optimization within the Department of the Navy.¹⁷ Simultaneously, the imprecise data collection process must be improved by revamping the discharge coding to accurately describe the reason a recruit is dropped from training.

Additionally, there must be a detailed inspection of the goals, approaches, and mechanisms of talent management process within the Corps. There is currently a breakdown in the oversight of, and the communication and coordination between, the Service’s talent management, recruiting, and entry-level training arms. The Corps’ overarching diversity goals and initiatives are being undermined. Publicized desires and the means to those ends must be aligned and exude sincerity. The current state of data collection and lack of effective analysis in this crucial matter represents the antithesis.

Through my personal experience and an attempt to confirm a hypothesis, I discovered a major divergence

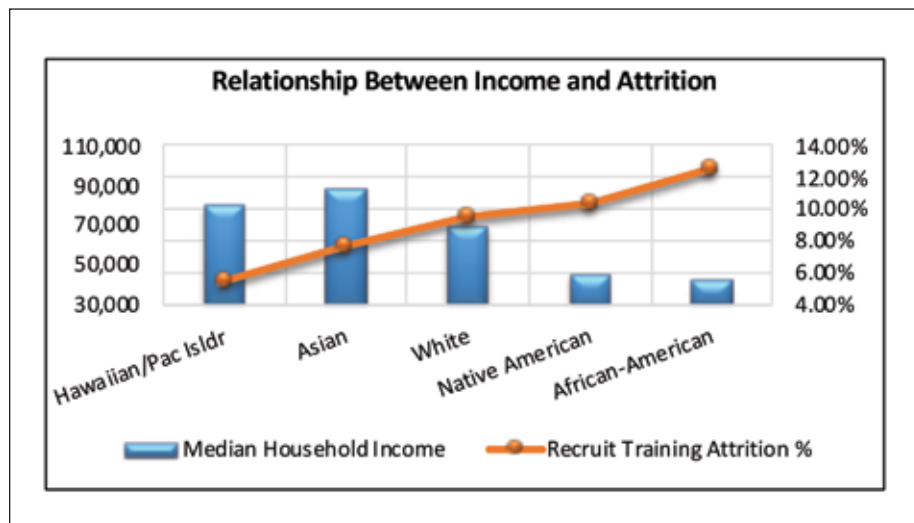


Figure 1.

from the norm in the rate of African American success at recruit training. A CMC-directed targeted demographic for recruitment—and the population of America with the lowest rate of swimming proficiency—has a statistically significant below average success rate at recruit training, and the Marine Corps does not know why. Additionally, the system to answer “why” is not effective and cannot disprove a highly plausible and troubling theory. Those factors serve as obstacles to organizational objectives. There are lines of effort running parallel to the diversity goals of the Corps. The lines will never intersect without deliberate actions to accelerate and ensure an overlap.

Notes

1. Gen David H. Berger, *38th Commandant’s Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: July 2019).
2. Ibid.
3. Gen David H. Berger, “Comments at Modern Day Marine,” (comments, Modern Day Marine Expo, Quantico, VA, September 2020).

4. Phyl Garland, “Atlanta, Black Mecca of the South,” *Ebony*, (Chicago, IL: Johnson Publishing Company, August 1971).
5. Maj Brian Wilson, CO, MCRS Atlanta Georgia, (2019). [RSS Swim Attrition]. Unpublished raw data.
6. CWO2 Jonathan Castro, Action Officer, G3, Marine Corps Recruiting Command, (2021). [FY16-20 MCRD Attrition]. Unpublished raw data.
7. The Defense Systems Analyst is a Marine Corps military occupational specialty (8852) in which a Marine, usual a graduate of the Naval Postgraduate School, participates in studies and analyses of force structures, weapon system mixes, and cost effectiveness comparisons that support resource allocation decisions in programming and analysis sections located at top management levels and research and development activities.
8. Staff, “Statistical Significance,” *IWH*, (April 2005), available at <https://www.iwh.on>.
9. On 10 February 2021, after nearly four weeks of email and telephonic conversations with the TRNGCMD G3, MCRC Enlisted Operations Branch, MCRC G-3 Plans & Research Branch, and RTR MCRDPI, Maj Danny Sanchez Jr, Market Research and Analysis Officer, MCRC,

G-3 Plans & Research Branch confirmed the requested data did not exist and that it could not be easily obtained.

10. Based on annual accessions 2016–2020 and the selection of E-9 during the same timeframe, one in 108 recruit training graduates achieves the pay grade of E-9 and rank of Sergeant Major or Master Gunnery Sergeant. That feat takes approximately twenty years. Thus, 565 recruit training failures represent five sergeants major or master gunnery sergeants, which would not exist in 20 years.

11. Staff, “Red Cross Launches Campaign to Cut Drowning in Half in 50 Cities,” *American Red Cross*, (May 2014), available at <https://www.redcross.org>.

12. Lindsay Mondick, “Why Are Black Youth at Highest Risk For Drowning?” *YMCA*, (2021), available at <https://www.ymca.net>.

13. Staff, “USA Swimming Foundation Announces 5–10 Percent Increase in Swimming Ability,” *USA Swimming Foundation*, (May 2017), available at <https://www.usaswimming.org>.

14. Staff, “Household Income by Race and Hispanic Origin: 2005–2009 and 2015–2019,” *U.S. Census*, (2019), available at <https://www.census.gov>.

15. Staff, “Table 216.60,” *National Center for Education Statistics*, (n.d.), available at <https://nces.ed.gov>.

16. Staff, “Households by Total Money Income, Race, and Hispanic Origin of Householder: 1967 to 2019,” *U.S. Census*, (2020), available at <https://www2.census.gov>.

17. Staff, “About the Naval Research Program,” *Naval Postgraduate School*, (n.d.), available at <https://nps.edu>; and Staff, “Marine Corps Studies System, Operations Analysis Directorate, Mission,” *Marines*, (n.d.), available at <https://www.mccdc.marines.mil>.

