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Effects of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” on Retention among Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Military Personnel

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This research brief quantifies how the United States military’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (DADT) policy affects retention rates among lesbian, gay, and bisexual military personnel. If the “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” policy had not been instituted, an estimated 4,000 lesbian, gay, and bisexual military personnel would have been retained each year since 1994. The military intends to add more than 18,000 new troops each year for the next five years. If patterns observed in 2004 were to continue for the next five years, the estimated retained LGB personnel would account for nearly one in six of the additional troops required.

What is “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”?

The United States military policy known as “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (DADT) requires that lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals (LGB) must remain silent about their sexual orientation and behavior if they are to serve in the military. In turn, the military is restricted from asking personnel about their sexual orientation.

Findings from a survey of LGB veterans suggest that this policy causes many of them to decide not to reenlist and continue their service when they reach the end of their tours of duty or, in the case of officers, resign their commissions at the end of their obligated service.

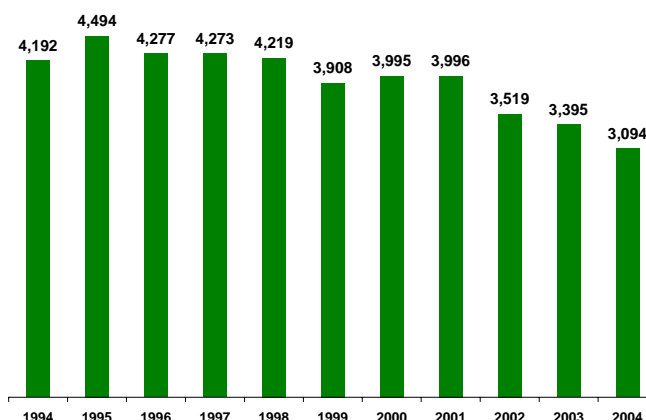
LGB Retention without DADT

Since the initiation of the DADT policy in 1994, an average of nearly 4,000 LGB military personnel each year on active duty or in the guard or reserves would have been retained if they could have been more open about their sexual orientation (see Figure 1). The estimate for the annual retention of LGB people has generally declined over time due to fewer discharges under the DADT policy coupled with fewer separations.

Estimates for the number of LGB military personnel retained in the absence of DADT for a given year begin with an estimate of the percentage of the total number of LGB individuals separating each year from active duty or the guard and reserves. Gates (2004) estimates that 2.5 percent of active duty military personnel and 3.2 percent of those in the guard and reserve are LGB. The estimation process assumes that the proportion of LGB individuals among those separating from the military each year is the same as the proportion in the broader military population.

A survey of 445 LGB veterans (Cochran et al. 2005) found that when asked about why they left the military, 19.6 percent said that it was because they

Figure 1.
Estimated number of separated and discharged LGB personnel who would be retained in the absence of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”



could not be open about their sexual orientation. The estimation procedure uses this figure and assumes that in the absence of DADT, 19.6 percent of LGB individuals who separate in a given year would otherwise decide to remain in the military.

Finally, it is assumed that those discharged under the DADT policy would not have been discharged and would remain in military service. Adding the number of annual DADT discharges to the 19.6 percent of LGB separations each year yields an estimate of the number of LGB military personnel retained each year in the absence of DADT.

What does this mean for current military operations?

Following an announcement in President Bush’s 2007 State of the Union address, the U.S. Department of Defense plans to add 92,000 more men and women to active duty military forces over the next five years.

According to a study by the Michael D. Palm Center, the number of convicted felons who enlisted in the U.S. military nearly doubled from 2004 to 2006, suggesting a lowering of standards in order to meet recruitment targets (Boucai 2007). With recruiters clearly struggling to find more troops to meet the President's goals, it becomes increasingly important to increase retention of well-trained and seasoned military personnel.

In order to meet the target of 92,000 additional troops in the next five years, the military must add 18,400 per year to its active duty ranks.

The estimates in Table 1 show that in 2004 nearly 1,000 active duty LGB soldiers would have been retained if they had been able to serve and be open about their sexual orientation. An additional 1,400 LGB personnel would be retained in the guard and reserve and be available for active duty. Finally, more than 600 soldiers were discharged under DADT.

If that pattern were to continue for the next five years, the military could gain more than three thousand troops per year. That is nearly one in six (16 percent) of the additional troops needed in each of the next five years.

References

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Cochran, B.N.; Balsam, K.F.; Simpson, T.L. 2005. "Service needs and mental health characteristics of LGBT veterans: Results from a national survey," Paper presented at the 39th annual convention of the Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies, Washington, DC.

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Table 1. Estimated lesbian, gay, and bisexual retention in the absence of DADT.

	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Active Duty Separations	299,948	285,794	253,610	246,835	238,736	233,765	217,239	215,478	188,524	190,303	211,265
Estimated LGB Active Duty Separations ^a	7,499	7,145	6,340	6,171	5,968	5,844	5,431	5,387	4,713	4,758	5,282
Guard and Reserve Separations	335,636	370,115	345,139	327,894	300,746	273,711	269,323	265,772	269,292	267,089	224,077
Estimated LGB Guard and Reserve Separations ^a	10,740	11,844	11,044	10,493	9,624	8,759	8,618	8,505	8,617	8,547	7,170
Number of Active Duty GLB separations that would otherwise been retained ^b	1,470	1,400	1,243	1,209	1,170	1,145	1,064	1,056	924	932	1,035
Number of Guard and Reserve LGB separations that would otherwise been retained ^b	2,105	2,321	2,165	2,057	1,886	1,717	1,689	1,667	1,689	1,675	1,405
Number of DADT discharges	617	772	870	1,007	1,163	1,046	1,241	1,273	906	787	653
Total GLB separations that would be retained	4,192	4,493	4,278	4,273	4,219	3,908	3,994	3,996	3,519	3,394	3,093

^aAssuming that 2.5% of separations are GLB, based on the estimate that 2.5% of active duty personnel and 3.2% of reserve personnel are GLB (Gates 2004)

^bAssuming that 19.6% of separated GLB personnel would be retained in the absence of DADT (Cochran et al. 2005)

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