

Junior Officer Retention in the United States Army: A Retrospective Case Study

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Abstract

The United States Army faces a persistent challenge retaining its Junior Officers, particularly following completion of initial service obligations. This turnover creates leadership gaps that hinder operational readiness, increase recruiting and training costs, and negatively affect both individual Officer careers and the institution's overall effectiveness. The problem impacts military personnel management, organizational resilience, and national security.

This qualitative exploratory case study investigates the experiences and decision-making processes that led former Junior Officers to voluntarily separate from the Army. Grounded in Job Embeddedness Theory and the Unfolding Model of Voluntary Turnover, the study deepens understanding of the personal and organizational factors influencing retention and attrition among this cohort.

Seventeen former Junior Officers who separated within the prior three years participated in semi-structured interviews conducted virtually. Data were analyzed thematically to identify salient patterns aligned with the research questions: "How do officers describe their separation decision-making process?" and "What personal and organizational experiences are most significant to their decision to separate?" The study design obtained rich narrative accounts uncovering nuanced retention dynamics.

Findings reveal that Officers describe their separation decisions as multi-staged, involving extended deliberation influenced by cumulative dissatisfaction and acute triggering events such as leadership failures, family stress, or policy changes. The most significant organizational factors to the Officer's separation decision were toxic leadership, limited career agency, and inflexible promotion timelines. The most significant personal experiences regarding the separation decision were frequent relocations and spouse employment disruption.

Additionally, Officers viewed current retention incentives as insufficient when core quality of life and leadership factors remained unaddressed.

The study concludes that improving Junior Officer retention requires holistic, flexible strategies that prioritize leadership development, family support, and personalized career management alongside the current retention incentives. The study recommends reforms such as merit-based promotion pathways, incorporating subordinate feedback into evaluations, and expanded non-monetary retention tools.

Implications for military personnel policy and future research include longitudinal, mixed-method investigations to validate findings and assess intervention efficacy. This study contributes an empirically grounded framework to guide more effective retention strategies critical to sustaining U.S. Army leadership capacity.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Employee retention is a critical challenge for organizations across various sectors (Porter & Rigby, 2021), but it presents unique and significant hurdles for the United States Military, particularly the Army (Department of the Army, 2021). The retention of Junior Officers, specifically those holding the ranks of Second Lieutenant (O-1), First Lieutenant (O-2), and Captain (O-3), has become an increasingly pressing issue with far-reaching implications for national security, operational readiness, and fiscal responsibility (Department of Defense, 2021).

The U.S. Army invests substantial resources in recruiting and training its Officers. The cost of training a recruit averages \$68,000 (Hogue & Miller, 2020), with even higher expenses for officers recruited through the United States Military Academy and the Reserve Officer Training Corps (Gerstein, 2022). These significant investments make Officer retention not just a matter of personnel management but also of financial stewardship.

The Army's promotion system, which mandates internal advancement, exacerbates the retention challenge. When Junior Officers leave the service, it creates a ripple effect, leading to gaps in mid-career Officer positions (Spain et al., 2021). The 2021 Career Engagement annual report by the Department of the Army revealed alarming statistics. Junior Officers show the highest intention to leave after completing their initial service obligation. Moreover, 43% of Officers voluntarily separate from the Army before becoming eligible for retirement (Department of Defense, 2021). This trend has resulted in staffing issues for mid-level Officer positions. In some cases, branches are unable to resource enough qualified candidates to fill open command positions, resulting in a further strained force and exacerbating the Officer retention problem (Jamison, 2024).

Several factors contribute to this retention problem. Family-military conflicts have been identified as a major concern (Carter & Swisher, 2020; DaLomba et al., 2021), with the demands of military life often straining personal relationships. Frequent relocations, a hallmark of military service, can disrupt family stability and career opportunities for spouses (McMahon & Bernard, 2019). Poor leadership experiences have also been cited as a factor driving officers away from service (Cialdini et al., 2021). The impact of combat experience on retention is complex. While some officers find purpose and motivation in operational deployments, others may experience burnout or trauma that influences their decision to leave (Griffith, 2022). Additionally, the appeal of civilian job opportunities, often offering higher salaries and more stable lifestyles, presents a constant pull for talented officers (Wang et al., 2022).

In response to these challenges, the Army has implemented various retention strategies. These include financial bonuses, increased choice in duty locations, and enhanced educational opportunities (Department of Defense, 2023). Recent policy changes have aimed to improve support for military families (Woodall et al., 2023) and increase parental leave (Herrick & Chai, 2023). A new pilot program specifically targeting Junior Officers offers non-financial incentives such as geographic stability and sabbaticals (Department of the Army, 2023).

Despite these efforts, the retention problem persists, indicating a need for a deeper understanding of the factors influencing Junior Officers' decisions to leave the service. A future study focusing on the experiences and perceptions of former Junior Officers who have recently separated from the Army, is necessary to further our understanding of the retention issues. By gaining insights into their decision-making processes and the effectiveness of current retention strategies, this research would seek to inform more targeted and effective approaches to officer retention. The implications of this study extend beyond the immediate concern of staffing.

Retaining experienced Junior Officers is crucial for maintaining the Army's leadership pipeline, ensuring operational readiness, and preserving institutional knowledge. As global security challenges evolve, the need for a stable, experienced Officer corps becomes ever more critical. Therefore, addressing the retention issue is not just an organizational imperative but a matter of national security.

Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed in this study is the low retention of Junior Officers in the U.S. Army. This issue is critical given the increased demands placed in the Army (Gerstein, 2022). Recent data published by the U.S. Army and Department of Defense demonstrate that Junior Officers are voluntarily leaving service predominantly after completing their initial service obligation or within eight years of service (Department of the Army, 2021; Department of Defense, 2021). This trend creates a leadership gap due to the Army's internal promotion system (Spain et al., 2021). Staffing levels for mid-level Officer positions have dropped below replacement levels impacting operational readiness and national security (Jamison, 2023 & Jamison, 2024). While this problem has been studied through various lenses (Gerstein, 2022; Herrick & Chai, 2023; McMahon & Bernard, 2019; Spain et al., 2021), the unfolding model of voluntary turnover (Lee et al., 1996) and job embeddedness theory (Mitchell et al., 2001) provide a perspective that better explains the reasons Officers leave.

These theories offer insights into the decision-making processes and the various factors that influence retention (Treuren & Fein, 2021; Nordmo et al., 2023), revealing nuances specific to the military context that previous studies have overlooked. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing effective military retention strategies (Nordmo et al., 2023). Failure to address this problem could lead to continued high turnover rates, resulting in significant costs for

training replacements, loss of institutional knowledge, and gaps in leadership (Spain et al., 2021). This, in turn, compromises the Army's capacity to respond effectively to global threats while also affecting individual officers' career progression and overall morale.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to examine the experiences and decision-making processes of former Junior Officers in the United States Army that led to their voluntary separation from service. This study addresses the problem of low retention rates among Junior Officers (Department of the Army, 2021) by examining the experiences and decision-making process of Junior Officers that led to their voluntary separation from the Army. This exploration directly addresses research questions regarding how former Junior Officers describe their decision-making processes and what personal and organizational experiences they identify as most significant in their decision to voluntarily separate. By focusing on these aspects, the study provides a greater understanding of Junior Officer attrition, ultimately informing more effective retention strategies for the U.S. Army.

The research involved data collection through semi-structured interviews with 17 participants, a sample size appropriate for in-depth data collection for qualitative research (Sharma et al., 2024). The interviews utilized a guide of standard questions for each participant while allowing flexibility to follow up on responses, enabling the researcher to draw out the most information and insight from each interviewee. The participants were former Junior Officers who separated from the Army within the past three years, recruited most economically through various social media platforms (Tsaltkan et al., 2024). The researcher conducted interviews virtually to accommodate participants across different geographic locations.

Additionally, secondary data sources such as Army retention policies and reports were used to complement data gained through the interview process (Stake, 1995). Army retention policies can be analyzed to provide a broader organizational context within which the individual's experiences can be understood. This will help situate personal narratives within the larger framework of Army policies and practices. By comparing interview data with policies and reports, the researcher can validate findings, enhancing the credibility and reliability of the study's conclusions. Data analysis followed the thematic analysis approach as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), which involves a systematic process of identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within the data. This method identified recurring themes and helped construct coherent narratives of the participants' journeys (Nolan-Cody et al., 2024). Thematic analysis aligns well with the study's aim to uncover recurring themes in the Officers' experiences and perceptions regarding their decision to leave the Army.

The study employed job embeddedness theory and the unfolding model of voluntary turnover (Lee et al., 1996; Mitchell et al., 2001) as a conceptual framework to guide the analysis. Findings from this research will inform the development of more effective retention strategies tailored to address the unique needs and concerns of Junior Officers, thereby supporting the Army's efforts to maintain operational readiness and leadership continuity.

Introduction to Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by an integrated conceptual framework that combines job embeddedness theory (JET) (Mitchell et al., 2001) and the unfolding model of voluntary turnover (Lee & Mitchell., 1996). This blended approach provides a comprehensive lens through which to examine the complex factors influencing retention decisions (Holtom & Inderrieden, 2006) and can be adapted to apply to the military context (Nordmo et al., 2023). Job

embeddedness theory posits that an individual's decision to remain in a job is influenced by three key factors: links (connections with people and institutions), fit (compatibility with job and community), and sacrifice (perceived cost of leaving) (Mitchell et al., 2006). In the military context, links represent professional relationships and unit cohesion, fit relates to alignment with military values and lifestyle, and sacrifice includes potential loss of benefits or career progression opportunities.

The unfolding model of voluntary turnover complements JET by offering insight into the decision-making processes leading to separation (Holtom & Inderrieden, 2006). This model suggests that employees follow one of five decision paths when choosing to leave an organization, involving either shocks to the system or gradual dissatisfaction (Lee & Mitchell, 1996). For military Officers, shocks include combat experiences or policy changes, while gradual dissatisfaction might stem from frequent deployments or work-life balance issues. Integrating these theories created a robust framework that considers both the anchoring factors keeping officers in service and the potential catalysts for departure (Holtom & Inderrieden, 2006). These combined theories directly shape the research questions of this study. Research Question 1, which asks how former Junior Officers describe their decision-making processes, is informed by the unfolding model of voluntary turnover. This model's emphasis on decision paths and shocks guides the inquiry into the specific events or gradual realizations that led officers to separate from the Army. Research Question 2, which explores the personal and organizational experiences former Junior Officers identify as most significant in their decision to separate voluntarily, is shaped by job embeddedness theory. The three key factors of JET - links, fit, and sacrifice - provide a structure for examining the various experiences that influenced Officers'

decisions to leave, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of both embedding and disembedding factors.

This blended approach allows for a nuanced exploration of how the embeddedness factors interact with potential shocks or gradual dissatisfaction to influence retention decisions (Holtom & Inderrieden, 2006). For instance, it can help examine how strong professional relationships (links) might mitigate the impact of a negative shock, or how a perceived lack of fit with military life might amplify gradual job dissatisfaction. This conceptual framework has guided the development of the problem statement by highlighting the multifaceted nature of retention issues in the military context. It underscores the need to examine not only the reasons Officers leave but also the factors that keep them embedded in their roles. The purpose statement reflects this complexity by focusing on describing the experiences and decision-making process of former Junior Officers, encompassing both embeddedness factors and turnover catalysts. By employing this integrated conceptual framework, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of Junior Officer retention in the U.S. Army. This approach allows for the exploration of both the individual experiences and organizational factors that influence retention decisions, potentially revealing nuanced insights that can inform more effective retention strategies.

Introduction to Research Methodology and Design (Nature of the Study)

This study employed a qualitative retrospective exploratory case study methodology to explore the experiences and decision-making processes of former Junior Officers in the United States Army. The qualitative approach is particularly suitable for this research. It allows for an in-depth exploration of complex human experiences and perceptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Specifically, the retrospective exploratory case study design enables the researcher to examine

past events and decisions from the participants' perspectives, providing rich, contextual data about the factors influencing their separation from the Army (Yin, 2018).

The chosen methodology and design are particularly well-suited to address the problem of low Junior Officer retention in the U.S. Army. By focusing on the lived experiences of former Officers, this approach allows for a nuanced understanding of the complex factors influencing retention decisions, which may not be fully captured through quantitative methods (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The retrospective nature of the study enables participants to reflect on their entire journey from entering service to separation, providing valuable insights into the cumulative effects of various factors on their decision-making process.

Furthermore, the case study design aligns with the theoretical framework of job embeddedness theory and the unfolding model of voluntary turnover, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of how various organizational and personal factors interact to influence retention decisions over time (Mitchell et al., 2001; Lee et al., 1996). This approach is particularly effective in addressing the purpose and research questions, which seek to understand the officers' experiences and decision-making processes. By employing this methodology and design, the study aims to generate rich, detailed data that can inform the development of more effective retention strategies tailored to the unique needs and concerns of Junior Officers in the U.S. Army. Ultimately, this research contributes to efforts to improve retention rates and maintain operational readiness in the Army.

Research Questions

RQ1

How do former Junior Officers describe their decision-making processes that led to their separation from the U.S. Army?

RQ2

What personal and organizational experiences do former Junior Officers identify as most significant in their decision to voluntarily separate from the U.S. Army?

Significance of the Study

This study on Junior Officer retention in the U.S. Army holds significant importance for military personnel management, national security, and organizational theory. By exploring the experiences and decision-making processes of former Junior Officers, this research addresses a critical gap in understanding the factors driving high turnover rates of military leaders.

The findings of this study can inform and improve retention strategies within the U.S. Army. By identifying key factors influencing Junior Officers' decisions to leave, military leadership can develop more targeted and effective retention policies, potentially reducing the significant costs associated with recruiting and training replacements.

Practically, the results of this study could have far-reaching effects on national security. By improving junior officer retention, the Army can maintain its leadership pipeline, ensuring a more experienced and capable officer corps capable of facing evolving global security challenges. This has implications not only for the U.S. Army but for the broader defense strategy of the United States. Moreover, this research provides valuable insights for other organizations facing similar retention challenges, particularly those with internal promotion systems or high-stress work environments. The findings inform best practices in employee retention across

various sectors, contributing to broader discussions on workforce management and organizational behavior. By addressing the study problem, achieving its purpose, and answering the research questions, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing Junior Officer retention. This knowledge can lead to the development of more effective retention strategies, potentially reducing turnover rates, improving operational readiness, and enhancing the overall effectiveness of the U.S. Army.

Definitions of Key Terms

Initial service obligation

The minimum period of active-duty service that a military officer commits to upon commissioning, typically ranging from 4 to 8 years depending on the commissioning source and branch of service (Department of Defense, 2021).

Junior Officer

A commissioned officer in the United States Army holding the rank of Second Lieutenant (O-1), First Lieutenant (O-2), or Captain (O-3) (Department of Defense, 2021).

Operational readiness

The capability of a unit, system, or equipment to perform the missions or functions for which it is organized or designed (Department of Defense, 2023).

Retention

The continued service of military personnel beyond their first term of enlistment or tour of duty (Spain et al., 2021).

Voluntary separation

The act of a service member choosing to leave military service before reaching retirement eligibility, typically after fulfilling their initial service obligation (Department of the Army, 2021).

Summary

This research delves into a critical organizational challenge facing the U.S. Army: the persistent exodus of Junior Officers from military service. Unlike previous research that primarily focused on statistical trends, this study aims to illuminate the human experience by directly engaging with those who have chosen to separate from the military. By employing a qualitative exploratory case study methodology, this research moves beyond surface-level explanations of Officer turnover. The study captured nuanced narratives of individual decision-making, exploring the complex interplay of personal, professional, and institutional factors that ultimately drive Junior Officers to voluntarily leave their military careers.

This investigation addressed two key research questions: (1) How do former Junior Officers describe their decision-making processes that led to their separation from the U.S. Army? and (2) What personal and organizational experiences do former Junior Officers identify as most significant in their decision to voluntarily separate from the U.S. Army? These questions align directly with the study's purpose of exploring the experiences and decision-making processes of former Junior Officers. The study employed semi-structured interviews of former Junior Officers who have recently separated from the Army to gather primary data. Secondary data sources such as Army retention policies and reports were integrated to provide contextual information.

Data analysis followed the thematic analysis approach, involving a systematic process of identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within the data. This method aligns well with the

study's aim to uncover recurring themes in the officers' experiences and perceptions regarding their decision to leave the Army. This research leveraged an innovative theoretical approach, integrating job embeddedness theory and the unfolding model of voluntary turnover to provide a comprehensive lens for understanding retention dynamics. Through semi-structured interviews with former Junior Officers, the research uncovers previously unexplored insights that could transform the Army's approach to talent management and organizational retention strategies.

The following chapter of this study will be a comprehensive literature review, providing a solid foundation for the research. It will begin by exploring the conceptual framework, delving into job embeddedness theory and the unfolding model of voluntary turnover, and their application in military contexts. The review will then examine existing literature on military retention, with a specific focus on officer retention. This section will analyze current trends, challenges, and strategies employed by the U.S. Army to address retention issues. By synthesizing these bodies of literature, the review will identify gaps in current knowledge and highlight the unique contribution this study aims to make to the field of military personnel management and retention.

Ultimately, this study represents a critical inquiry into the human dimension of military service, with implications that extend far beyond personnel management. The alignment of the research questions, data collection procedures, and analysis methods with the study's purpose ensures a comprehensive exploration of Junior Officer retention, potentially influencing national security preparedness and the future effectiveness of the U.S. Army's leadership development.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The U.S. Army faces a persistent challenge in retaining its Junior Officers. This problem has intensified due to the increased demands on the modern military force. This study addresses this critical issue by exploring the experiences and decision-making processes of former Junior Officers who voluntarily separated from service. Understanding the factors that contribute to their departure is essential for developing effective retention strategies and ensuring the readiness and stability of the Army.

This chapter provides a comprehensive review of the existing literature relevant to Junior Officer retention. It begins by establishing the conceptual framework that guides this research. Drawing upon the unfolding model of voluntary turnover (Lee & Mitchell, 1994) and job embeddedness theory (Mitchell et al., 2001) to provide a holistic understanding of the factors influencing an Officer's decision to stay or leave. This section delves into the core tenets of each theory, explaining how "shocks" can trigger turnover processes and how links, fit, and sacrifice contribute to an Officer's embeddedness within the Army and their surrounding community. Following the establishment of the conceptual framework, alternative theories relevant to employee retention, such as social exchange theory, psychological contract theory, and conservation of resources theory, are discussed and provide context for the decision to use the dual conceptual framework.

Finally, the review concludes with a brief overview of the historical evolution of research on military Officer retention. By examining past trends and approaches, this section provides context for the present study and highlights opportunities for future research. This chapter lays the groundwork for the qualitative exploratory case study that follows, providing a theoretical

and empirical foundation for exploring the lived experiences of former Junior Officers and informing the development of effective retention strategies for the U.S. Army.

Literature Search Process

The literature search for this review was conducted across several databases, predominantly utilizing the NU Library database as well as external links including ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global, EBSCOhost (encompassing Academic Search Premier, Business Source Complete, and PsycINFO). Additionally, Google Scholar was utilized as a search engine to identify relevant articles, reports, and literature. Search parameters included a combination of keywords related to military officer retention, such as "military officer retention," "Army officer turnover," "junior officer attrition," "job embeddedness military," "unfolding model military," and "career commitment Army." These search terms were combined using "AND" and "OR" to refine the results. The search was limited to literature published between 2019 and 2025 to focus on contemporary issues and relevant theoretical developments, with the exception of seminal resources for theory or historical context. The types of literature included peer-reviewed journal articles, dissertations, theses, government reports (including the DACES reports), and conference proceedings.

Conceptual Framework: Understanding Junior Officer Retention Through the Unfolding Model and Job Embeddedness Theory

To comprehensively explore the persistent issue of Junior Officer retention in the U.S. Army, this study adopts a dual conceptual framework, drawing upon the unfolding model of voluntary turnover (Lee & Mitchell, 1994) and job embeddedness theory (JET; Mitchell et al., 2001). These frameworks, while distinct in their primary focus, provide a holistic perspective on the factors influencing a Junior Officer's decision to remain in or voluntarily separate from military service. Together, they offer a nuanced understanding of why employees leave organizations and what keeps them committed to their roles.

The Unfolding Model of Voluntary Turnover: Unraveling the Decision to Leave Junior Officer Retention Through the Unfolding Model and Job Embeddedness Theory

In contrast to traditional turnover models that primarily emphasize job dissatisfaction as the primary driver of turnover, the unfolding model of voluntary turnover, developed by Lee and Mitchell (1994), directs attention to the cognitive processes that individuals undertake when deciding to leave an organization. Rather than assuming a linear progression from dissatisfaction to turnover, the unfolding model highlights the role of "shocks"—significant events that trigger a deliberate evaluation of one's job and the possibility of quitting (Lee & Mitchell, 1994). Lee and Mitchell (1994) argued that the decision to leave is not always a premeditated and static movement. Instead, it can be a dynamic process influenced by unexpected events that prompt individuals to reconsider their commitment to an organization.

A shock, as defined by Lee and Mitchell (1994), is "a very distinguishable event that jars the employee toward deliberate judgments about their jobs and, perhaps, to voluntarily quit their job" (p. 60). These shocks can be positive or negative and may originate from personal or

professional contexts. For example, a sudden deployment, an unsolicited job offer, or perceived unfair treatment by leadership could serve as shocks for Junior Officers in the U.S. Army. These events may lead officers to reevaluate their commitment to military service and consider alternative career paths.

The unfolding model outlines four distinct paths that employees may follow after experiencing a shock. The first path involves an immediate and automatic turnover decision based on a pre-established "script" or plan. For instance, an officer may have decided in advance to leave the Army if they fail to secure a specific promotion within a set timeframe. The second path involves reevaluating job satisfaction without having an alternative option in mind. In this scenario, an officer might leave due to dissatisfaction with leadership or work-life balance but without securing another job beforehand. The third path occurs when an individual evaluates their current position against a specific job alternative following a shock event. For example, an unsolicited civilian job offer with a better work-life balance might prompt an officer who is otherwise satisfied with military service to consider leaving. Finally, the fourth path does not involve any singular shock but instead results from a gradual reassessment of organizational commitment over time. This path may involve either systematic job searching or simply quitting without securing another position.

The dynamic nature of these paths underscores that turnover decisions are not always driven by dissatisfaction. Turnover decisions can also result from external opportunities or life changes. Subsequent research has refined this model further. For example, Lee et al. (1999) found that shocks could alter pre-existing "scripts" across multiple paths and that unsolicited job offers could initiate turnover processes in various contexts. These refinements highlight the model's flexibility in explaining diverse turnover scenarios.

Job Embeddedness Theory: Understanding What Keeps Officers in Place

While the unfolding model focuses on why employees leave organizations, job embeddedness theory (JET), developed by Mitchell et al. (2001), provides insight into what keeps employees committed to their roles. JET emphasizes that individuals become embedded in their jobs through a web of connections within their work environments and communities. These connections create a sense of "stickiness" that makes leaving more difficult, even when individuals experience dissatisfaction with certain aspects of their jobs.

Mitchell et al. (2001) identified three key dimensions of job embeddedness: links, fit, and sacrifice. Links refer to the formal and informal connections individuals have with colleagues, supervisors, subordinates, and community members. For Junior Officers in the U.S. Army, these links might include professional relationships within their units, participation in military traditions or activities, involvement in family support groups, and ties to local community organizations near their base (Hilal & Litsey, 2020; Howes & Goodman-Delahunty, 2014). Strong links foster a sense of belonging and interdependence that can make leaving more challenging.

Fit refers to the perceived compatibility between an individual's values, skills, career goals, and their organization's culture or demands (Mitchell et al., 2001). For Junior Officers, fit might involve alignment with Army values such as loyalty and duty or satisfaction with assigned roles that match their skill sets and career aspirations (Hayes & Stazyk, 2019). Officers who feel personally aligned with the Army's mission are more likely to remain committed despite external pressures.

Sacrifice reflects what individuals perceive they would lose if they left their current position (Mitchell et al., 2001). For Junior Officers, potential sacrifices might include losing access to military benefits such as healthcare or housing allowances; forfeiting retirement plans; leaving behind close-knit camaraderie built through shared experiences; or facing challenges transitioning into civilian employment (Greeshma et al., 2021). Sacrifices are particularly significant for officers who have invested years into building military careers or who rely on unique benefits provided by military service.

Job embeddedness theory provides valuable insight into how these dimensions interact to create a sense of embeddedness within both organizational and community contexts. Employees with strong links across multiple domains are less likely to leave because doing so would disrupt these connections. Similarly, individuals who perceive high levels of fit are more likely to feel satisfied with their roles and less inclined toward turnover decisions.

An Integrated Framework for Understanding Junior Officer Retention

By integrating the unfolding model of voluntary turnover with job embeddedness theory, this study adopts a comprehensive approach to understanding Junior Officer retention in the U.S. Army. While job embeddedness theory explains why officers stay through factors such as links, fit, and sacrifice within organizational and community contexts (Mitchell et al., 2001), the unfolding model sheds light on how shocks trigger cognitive processes leading to voluntary separation (Lee & Mitchell, 1994). Together, these frameworks provide complementary perspectives on retention dynamics.

This integrated framework acknowledges that retention decisions are rarely straightforward or driven by singular factors like satisfaction or dissatisfaction alone. Instead,

they result from complex interactions between social networks, organizational alignment, external opportunities, personal values, and life circumstances (Zhang et al., 2012). By examining both why officers stay embedded within military service and how they navigate decisions about leaving after experiencing shocks or gradual reassessments of commitment (Lee et al., 1999; Mitchell et al., 2001), this study aims to generate actionable insights for improving retention strategies tailored specifically for Junior Officers.

Alternative Frameworks and Justification for the Selected Framework

While the unfolding model of voluntary turnover (Lee & Mitchell, 1994) and job embeddedness theory (Mitchell et al., 2001) provide a robust and complementary framework for understanding Junior Officer retention in the U.S. Army, several alternative frameworks could also be considered. These frameworks, while valuable in specific contexts, are less suitable for this research due to their narrower focus or inability to fully capture the unique complexities of military service. This section explores three alternative frameworks—social exchange theory, psychological contract theory, and conservation of resources theory—and justifies why they were not selected for this study.

Social Exchange Theory. Social exchange theory (SET) is one of the most prominent frameworks used to explain employee behavior and retention. Rooted in sociology and organizational behavior, SET posits that relationships between employees and organizations are based on reciprocal exchanges of resources, such as effort, loyalty, and rewards (Blau, 1964). Employees remain with an organization when they perceive that the rewards they receive (e.g., salary, benefits, recognition) are commensurate with their contributions (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). If the perceived balance of this exchange is disrupted—such as when employees feel undervalued or overworked—they may consider leaving the organization.

While SET offers valuable insights into the transactional nature of employee-organization relationships, it is less suited to this study because it focuses predominantly on economic and psychological exchanges rather than the broader social and contextual factors influencing retention. For Junior Officers in the U.S. Army, decisions to stay or leave are often influenced by unique factors such as deployments, camaraderie within units, alignment with military values, and sacrifices associated with leaving (Mitchell et al., 2001). These factors extend beyond simple exchanges of effort and rewards and are better captured by job embeddedness theory's dimensions of links, fit, and sacrifice. Furthermore, SET does not adequately account for the role of shocks or life-changing events that may prompt officers to reevaluate their commitment to military service—a critical aspect addressed by the unfolding model of voluntary turnover.

Psychological Contract Theory. Psychological contract theory (PCT) focuses on the implicit agreements between employees and organizations regarding mutual expectations and obligations (Rousseau, 1989). This theory suggests that when employees perceive a breach in their psychological contract. Such as unmet promises about career advancement opportunities or work-life balance, they may experience dissatisfaction and consider leaving the organization. PCT has been widely used in studies examining employee turnover in contexts where trust and perceived fairness play a central role.

While PCT provides a useful lens for understanding how unmet expectations influence turnover intentions, it is not as comprehensive as the selected framework for this study. PCT primarily focuses on individual perceptions of fairness and reciprocity within the employment relationship but does not adequately address external factors such as community ties or personal sacrifices associated with leaving an organization (Mitchell et al., 2001). For Junior Officers in the U.S. Army, decisions to stay or leave often involve complex interactions between

professional obligations, personal values, family considerations, and community connections, factors that are better captured by job embeddedness theory's multidimensional approach. Additionally, PCT does not account for sudden shocks or life events that may disrupt an officer's commitment to military service—an area where the unfolding model excels.

Conservation of Resources Theory. Conservation of resources (COR) theory posits that individuals strive to acquire, retain, and protect valuable resources such as time, energy, social support, and financial stability (Hobfoll, 1989). Turnover occurs when employees perceive a threat to their resources or experience resource depletion due to excessive demands from their jobs. COR has been particularly useful in studies examining burnout and stress-related turnover in high-pressure professions such as healthcare and law enforcement.

While COR offers valuable insights into how resource loss influences turnover decisions, it is less suitable for this study because it primarily focuses on stress-related factors rather than broader contextual influences on retention. For Junior Officers in the U.S. Army, resource-related concerns such as work-life balance or financial stability are certainly important but do not fully capture the complexity of their decision-making processes. Factors such as alignment with military values (fit), relationships within units (links), and sacrifices associated with leaving (sacrifice) play a significant role in retention decisions but are not adequately addressed by COR. Moreover, COR does not explicitly consider the role of shocks or gradual reassessments of commitment—key elements of the unfolding model that are particularly relevant to understanding voluntary separation among Junior Officers.

Justification for the Selected Framework

The decision to use job embeddedness theory and the unfolding model of voluntary turnover as the guiding framework for this study was driven by their ability to comprehensively

address both sides of retention: why employees stay and why they leave. job embeddedness theory provides a nuanced understanding of how links within an organization and community foster attachment; how fit between personal values/goals and organizational culture promotes satisfaction; and how sacrifices associated with leaving create barriers to turnover (Mitchell et al., 2001). These dimensions align closely with the unique experiences of Junior Officers in the U.S. Army.

In contrast, the unfolding model complements JET by focusing on how shocks, whether positive or negative, trigger cognitive processes that lead individuals to consider leaving their jobs (Lee & Mitchell, 1994). This model's emphasis on sudden events or gradual reassessments provides critical insights into why even highly embedded employees might choose to separate from an organization. Together, these frameworks offer a holistic approach that captures both internal organizational dynamics (e.g., relationships within units) and external contextual factors (e.g., family considerations), making them uniquely suited to studying Junior Officer retention in a military context. While alternative frameworks like social exchange theory, psychological contract theory, and conservation of resources theory provide valuable perspectives on specific aspects of turnover or retention, they lack the breadth needed to fully address the multifaceted nature of Junior Officer decision-making processes. By integrating JET's focus on retention with the unfolding model's emphasis on voluntary separation pathways, this study adopts a comprehensive framework capable of generating actionable insights for improving retention strategies tailored specifically to Junior Officers in the U.S. Army.

Brief History of Military Officer Retention Research

The history of officer retention in the U.S. military reveals a persistent challenge that has spanned several decades. The issue gained prominence in the 1970s with the transition to an all-volunteer force. Which significantly altered the dynamics of military personnel management (Wardynski et al., 2009). This shift necessitated a more focused approach to officer retention, as the military could no longer rely on conscription to maintain its officer corps.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the military grappled with fluctuating retention rates, influenced by factors such as economic conditions, changing societal attitudes towards military service, and the evolving nature of warfare (Wardynski et al., 2009). The end of the Cold War in the early 1990s brought new challenges, as the military downsized and officers faced increased uncertainty about their career prospects. The post-9/11 era introduced new complexities to the retention issue. Extended deployments and the demands of protracted conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan placed unprecedented strains on officers and their families, impacting retention decisions (Kane, 2011).

The study of officer retention has evolved significantly over time. Early research in the 1970s and 1980s primarily focused on the impact of different commissioning sources on retention rates. Demirel (2002) conducted a comprehensive statistical analysis comparing retention rates among graduates of Service Academies, ROTC programs, Officer Candidate/Training Schools, and Direct Appointment programs. As research progressed, two critical retention points emerged as focal areas: the end of the initial service obligation and the ten-year mark (Demirel, 2002). These points represent significant decision-making junctures in an officer's career, where retention behaviors tend to vary across commissioning programs.

In recent years, at the end of what could be considered the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) era, research has increasingly focused on the many factors which drive servicemembers to separate from the military such as military careers impact on ones family (Carter & Swisher, 2020; DaLomba et al., 2021; Gerstein, 2022; Herrick & Chai, 2023; King et al., 2020; Woodall et al., 2023) poor quality leadership (Carter et al., 2019; Cialdini et al., 2021; Daniel et al., 2019; King et al., 2020; Spain et al., 2021) attractive civilian employment (Spain et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2022), and frequency of deployments (Griffith, 2022; Jung et al., 2023; Woodall et al., 2023).

This historical context informs future research on officer retention in several ways. It underscores the need for a comprehensive approach that considers multiple factors influencing retention decisions, including commissioning source, career stage, economic conditions, and organizational culture. It highlights the importance of studies that examine retention decisions over an officer's entire career, rather than focusing solely on specific retention points. It suggests that future research should consider the evolving nature of military service and societal attitudes toward the military, as these factors have historically influenced retention patterns. It emphasizes the potential value of transformational leadership and talent management practices in addressing retention challenges, as suggested by more recent studies.

The history of officer retention research reflects a gradual shift from a narrow focus to a more comprehensive understanding of the multiple factors influencing officers' career decisions. This evolution highlights the complexity of the issue and the need for continued research and innovative approaches to maintaining a strong and experienced officer corps.

Military Service as a Mechanism for Socio-Economic Mobility

The idea that military service is a mechanism for social and economic mobility has been used before (Castleman et al., 2019). Research by Saxon (2021) explicitly demonstrates how military service is an intentionally designed avenue of economic mobility within American society. Military service, especially in the All-Volunteer Force era, comes with many benefits such as job security, education, occupational training, healthcare, and access to financial resources such as zero down payment home loans (Saxon, 2021). The military also offers social benefits through access to certain “clubs,” professional networking, and employment preference in many government and private organizations after completing military service (Saxon, 2021). The most publicized benefit of military service is the “G.I. Bill,” which covers 36 months of tuition, housing, books, and supplies, which, depending on where one chooses to use their G.I. Bill-funded education, may exceed \$200,000 in benefits (Castleman et al., 2019). Considering a nearly 50% median income difference between those who do and do not have a bachelor's degree, this benefit creates an attractive incentive for many to join the military. However, once servicemembers completed the required service to earn this entitlement, there was much less motivation to remain in service until the benefit was adjusted in 2013 allowing for servicemembers to transfer the benefit to their children in return for an additional four years of service (Castleman et al., 2019). This ability to transfer education benefits to a servicemember's children increased the impact military service has on socioeconomic status across at least two generations, enabling the servicemembers to have a well-paying career and retirement benefits while their children can take advantage of educational benefits at a minimal financial cost to the family (Castleman et al., 2019).

For disadvantaged people in the lower socioeconomic class, the military provides an opportunity to “move up the socioeconomic ladder,” to those who would not have the resources or opportunities to do so otherwise (Saxon, 2021). This relates to the issue of retention in that the investments the Army or larger federal government makes in its personnel, may not be exclusively designed to keep servicemembers in the Army. Rather, with the understanding that the individuals who earn and take advantage of these benefits will have an impact on the society and economy at large after their service is complete (McDonald, 2021). This concept is explored by McDonald (2021), who focuses on the military industry and the investments in servicemembers increase their skills and after military commitments people enter the private sector that supports the military, increasing its overall effectiveness.

Although common opinion and understanding is that military service and its associated benefits are targeted toward the socio-economic lower class as a means of mobility (Saxon, 2021), the current trends of who is joining the military contradict this narrative (Asoni et al., 2022). Based on research done by Asoni et al. (2022), a disproportionate number of servicemembers are from the middle class, particularly those whose parents’ income is higher than the U.S. median income. A proposed explanation for these dissenting findings is that the military has become more selective in terms of physical health, cognitive ability, and previous illegal conduct (Asoni et al., 2022). Additionally, one statistic that holds conventional wisdom is that the members of the upper class or whose parents are in the highest income bracket are very unlikely to join the military. This lack of representation of the “1%” is in line with conventional thinking about the motivations for military service (Asoni et al., 2022). This also partially explains where the misconception of military service being targeted toward low-income families comes from. Being that the lower and middle economic classes are represented but the upper

economic classes are not, skews the average family income of a servicemember below the median of the entire population (Asoni et al. 2022). Despite these dissenting findings recent research points to the possibility that the military as a whole does not intend to retain its best and brightest. Rather the military is a mechanism to provide opportunities for those in the lower socio-economic class to earn an education and gain skills that are highly valuable in the civilian marketplace that would otherwise be out of reach (Castleman et al., 2019; McDonald, 2021; Saxon, 2021). Following the acquisition of education and training the commercial talent marketplace then benefits from this otherwise unrealized resource in terms of human capital. Based on this understanding we should expect that the highest performers would naturally take their talents to the commercial labor market, and not necessarily keep the best talent in the military labor market.

Emphasis on Leadership Affects on Retention

Throughout the literature, there are a significant number of resources that point out how leadership can affect retention (Cialdini et al., 2021; Carter et al., 2019; Daniel et al., 2019; Spain et al., 2021), as well as how different leadership styles or approaches affect an employee's decision to stay or leave an organization (Pham et al., 2023; Wei et al., 2022). Cialdini et al. (2021) demonstrated a link between unethical leadership behaviors and higher turnover rates of employees. This research also showed that those who chose to stay within an organization despite an unethical leader, were more likely to engage in unethical behaviors themselves, creating a domino effect of bad actors (Cialdini et al., 2021). In addition to unethical behavior, a leader's performance, especially in situations that are critical to the individual, increases intentions to leave an organization if the performance or response does not meet the employee's expectations (Daniel et al., 2019).

It is not just poor leadership that pushes employees to leave an organization, good leaders also influence people to stay at an organization. Research by Carter et al. (2019), demonstrated that employees who had good immediate supervisors were more likely to stay, and those with good quality senior bosses were more likely to stay at an organization. Additionally, this study found that this increase in retention occurred after six months of working for a strong leader, demonstrating how quickly good quality leadership can impact an individual (Carter, et al., 2019).

The quality of leadership also has an impact on the quality of retention. Spain et al. (2021) demonstrated that high-quality senior leadership within an organization has an increased impact on the retention of high-quality employees and the attrition of low-quality employees. This finding was based on a longitudinal study that demonstrated that leaders in the top third of their peer group had a higher retention rate of employees who were ranked in the top two-thirds of their peer group, as well as high attrition of employees who ranked in the bottom third of their peer group (Spain et al., 2021). Based on this finding it was proposed that a method to determine the quality of a leader is to measure the retention of the top two-thirds of their employees and the attrition of the bottom third of employees (Spain et al., 2021).

There is also research on the different leadership styles and their effect on retention. Pham et al. (2023) demonstrated that servant leadership was a crucial element in retaining employees through their advocacy on behalf of the employee and mediation between the employee and the organizational structure and processes. Additional work by Wei et al. (2022), demonstrated a link between transformational leadership and retention, through the transformational leaders' impact on job satisfaction, improved working environments, and the development of standardized training programs. This focus on transformational leadership was

also linked to increased retention by Hauer et al. (2021), who found that transformational leadership prevented turnover by increasing employee commitment to an organization.

Factors that Drive Military Officer Retention

A recent study found that junior U.S. Army officers were the demographic that was the most likely to leave the military after their initial service obligation. Their main reasons include lack of stability, negative effects on family life, and heavy workloads. Most of these officers separate before reaching ten years of service (Department of the Army, 2021). The area of military life conflicting with family life or obligations is a thoroughly examined area of this topic. McMahon & Bernard (2019) demonstrate the effect of permanent change of station (PCS) moves or the military sending a servicemember to a new installation every three years. This system was created when males made up nearly all servicemembers, only 10% of servicemembers had families, and 60% of women were not in the workforce (McMahon & Bernard, 2019). In contrast to today, where 70% of servicemembers have a family, over 70% of women are in the workforce, and 36% of spouses have advanced degrees, the cost of a military family uprooting every three years has grown (McMahon & Bernard, 2019). Finding new housing, schools, childcare, and spouse employment are among the most significant challenges for a military family. The highest among these is spouse employment, where military families report a 28% reduction in annual earnings due to PCS moves, and 22% of spouses work beneath their education and experience level (McMahon & Bernard, 2019).

DaLomba et al. (2021), demonstrate the challenges of military spouse under-employment and its link to turnover intentions in the servicemember. This issue predominantly affects the Officer population whose spouses are more likely to hold advanced degrees (DaLomba et al., 2021). Due to the frequent and unpredictable moves that are part of military life, spouses have

difficulty finding adequate employment and either choose to not work or accept a job that is below their level of education and experience. Both outcomes drive the servicemember towards separation (DaLomba et al., 2021).

Another area that significantly affects retention is servicemembers having children (Herrick & Chai, 2023). The evidence of this comes from Herrick & Chai (2023), whose research shows that in 21% of cases, a service member chose to separate from the military after having a child. The proposed reason for this high turnover is the geographic separation from an extended family support network, the demands of military life including extended field training and deployments, and the limited availability of childcare. Which motivates servicemembers to separate after having children (Herrick & Chai, 2023).

The civilian labor market also has a significant effect on the intentions of servicemembers to separate after their first service obligation or contract (Wang et al., 2022). This is particularly significant within specialties that have high costs associated with obtaining the necessary skills and direct application to civilian employment such as medical professionals, lawyers, and pilots (Wang et al., 2022). Based on this the military has created a financial incentive structure to ensure that high-demand specialties are being paid competitive compensation when compared to the civilian labor market. However, these systems do not optimize for retaining the highest performing and highest value service members, and the level of compensation is set annually, enabling changes in the civilian labor market demand to entice servicemembers to leave for higher pay in the private sector (Wang et al., 2022).

Another area that affects one's intention to stay or leave military service is deployment and combat experience (Griffith, 2022). The frequency and duration of deployments have two countering effects. First, the increase in pay due to special entitlements, hazard duty pay, combat

pay and not paying income tax when deployed, increases the financial stability of a servicemember and their family increasing their overall satisfaction and intention to stay in the military (Griffith, 2022). However, the duration and frequency of deployments also had a negative effect on marital satisfaction and in turn drove servicemembers toward separation (Griffith, 2022). Additionally, when servicemembers have experienced combat, or have seen people be wounded or killed during a deployment, their intention to stay in service is increased. The proposed reason for this is an increase in the feelings of obligation to do one's part. Conversely, when a service member wounds or kills someone, has lost a friend in combat, or experiences combat trauma, they are less likely to remain in service (Griffith, 2022).

There are also counterintuitive findings about military retention. Hogue & Miller (2020) detail the differences in the contracts of Officers and Enlisted personnel as potential drivers for turnover. The difference is that enlisted contracts are "opt-in" to continuing service while officer contracts are "opt-out." This difference means the enlisted service members must go through a process and sign an additional contract if they wish to stay in service, if they do nothing they will be separated from service on the last day of their contract. The Officer must wait until they have reached the end of their service obligation and request a release from active duty or submit their resignation. The structure of Officer contracts requiring the "opt-out" takes advantage of career inertia and is expected to keep officers in service longer than if they had a set date for their separation.

Carter & Swisher (2020), also demonstrate an unusual phenomenon if servicemembers' first duty station is within driving distance of their hometown, they are more likely to leave after their initial contract. Based on previous research detailing the strain military life has on family (DaLomba et al., 2021; Herrick & Chai, 2023; McMahon & Bernard, 2019), one would assume

that being closer to the extended family would increase retention. However, it is believed that this unexpected result comes from the displacement from one's family structure leading to stronger bonds with colleagues and the organization, which increases the likelihood of remaining in service (Carter & Swisher, 2020).

Current Strategies and Incentives to Improve Retention

The Department of Defense and the U.S. Army have acknowledged that some specific occupations require monetary incentives to both attract and keep talent that would be able to have a more financially lucrative career outside of military service. Subsequently, there are incentive programs for pilots, Special Operations Officers, military lawyers, and medical Officers (Department of Defense, 2023). Additionally, the Department of Defense revised the retirement system in 2016. Changing from a pension earned after 20 years of service to a TSP or a vested 5% match 401k plan. This change disincentivized servicemembers from achieving 20 years of service. To limit the impact this change has on retention, the military instituted a continuation pay bonus, which servicemembers are eligible for if they are between eight and twelve years of service and can receive the bonus in exchange for an additional four-year service obligation (Department of Defense, 2024). A major challenge to the effectiveness of these programs is that they are set with the average individual (Wang et al., 2022). This means that the high performers that the military wants to retain and who have more lucrative options outside the military are not adequately incentivized by bonuses or financial incentives. Also, the below-average performers who could be retained at a lower price or without a bonus at all, are being overpaid to stay in service (Wang et al., 2022).

Additional changes that are not financial incentives in recent years that have been directed at improving retention are the changes in uniform and grooming standards, increased

behavioral health service availability (Gerstein, 2022), and increasing the amount of time given for parental leave (Herrick & Chai, 2023). The most significant of these in terms of its impact on retention is the extension of the parental leave program, which now provides twelve weeks of paid leave for both parents after a birth or adoption. Herrick and Chai (2023), demonstrated that this change decreased the attrition of female servicemembers by 22%, representing a significant increase of overall retention. The most recent incentive program that has been proposed to target specifically U.S. Army Junior Officers currently named the Junior Officer Retention Incentive Program, intends to provide the ability to choose the geographic region the Officer is assigned to, an option for geographic stability or the ability to conduct two assignments from the same area without having to move, timing flexibility or the ability to shorten or extend an assignment by up to 24 months, and the ability to perform a ninety-day sabbatical to focus on professional development (Department of the Army, 2023). This program is still pre-decisional however; it demonstrates that the Army recognizes the problem of junior Officer retention and the need to address it.

Finally, based on the results of the most recent Department of the Army Career Engagement Survey (DACES) in 2023, the Army is creating a pilot program called the Army Junior Officer Counsel (South, 2025). This program focuses on attaining feedback from junior Officers themselves about what issues are driving Officers out of the Army as well as putting junior Officers in leadership positions to gain information from the Junior enlisted on why they are leaving service at increased rates. One of the innovative approaches this program makes comes from the program being run by junior Officers themselves, in hopes that without senior leader involvement, the feedback and recommendations will be more candid, and Officers will be less likely to hold back on survey responses and recommendations for institutional changes.

These pilot programs are currently in place at the 3rd Sustainment Brigade in Georgia, the 16th Sustainment Brigade in Germany, and the 111th Military Intelligence Brigade in Arizona South, 2025).

The Army Junior Officer Counsels have already started making recommendations that may soon be implemented in limited areas. One such recommendation comes from the cultural and economic changes over the last few decades where the military, especially in the Officer Corps have working spouses, whose civilian professional careers are also in their early stages and require more stability to establish a professional reputation, complete licensing or certification requirements, which would be hindered by the military's typical three-year movement cycle. There have historically been methods for service members to request location stabilization. However, spouse career requirements were not considered as a justification to stabilize a service member at a location. The Army Junior Officer Counsels have recommended adding spousal career development as a justification for servicemembers to request stabilization for up to two additional years at a duty location (South, 2025).

Financial Retention Incentives

Financial bonuses have long been a tool used by the U.S. military to encourage service members to remain in service, particularly in critical roles and specialties. However, the effectiveness of these financial incentives has been questioned. These incentives have been found to suffer from selection biases and inherent inefficiencies (Switzer, 2020; Wang et al., 2022). Understanding these drawbacks is crucial for developing more effective retention strategies that truly meet the needs of both the military and its personnel.

One of the most significant problems with traditional military financial bonuses is the issue of selection bias, specifically, adverse selection. Switzer (2020) described the issue as

simply throwing money at a problem. This occurs when bonus programs primarily attract individuals who are already inclined to stay in the military, regardless of the financial incentive. This means that the bonus is rewarding behavior that would have occurred anyway, resulting in a misallocation of resources. The lack of a measurable impact on retention underscores this point (Switzer, 2020). The Army program, designed to stem the outflow of junior officers' cost nearly \$500 million; the program simply did not affect the retention of these junior officers.

This phenomenon is further explained as "economic rents". Which refers to the bonus money paid to individuals who would have accepted a smaller bonus or none in exchange for their continued service (Wang et al., 2022). The Army may end up paying more than 62% of a bonus program's direct costs in economic rent (Lockwood, 2021). This means that a significant portion of the bonus expenditure does not contribute to retaining individuals who were at risk of leaving; instead, it rewards those who were already committed.

Wang, Gates, and Simerman (2022) extend this discussion by highlighting the problem of moral hazard. Traditional retention bonuses often fail to incentivize continued high performance throughout a service member's career. Once an individual receives the bonus, there is less incentive to maximize effort or strive for excellence, because the financial reward is already secured. This can result in a decline in productivity or commitment, thereby undermining the overall effectiveness of the bonus program. It is important for officers to feel that they are making a difference, and bonuses can give the idea that leadership thinks they are making a difference, which boosts morale.

Beyond selection biases, financial incentive programs in the military often suffer from inefficiencies related to their design and implementation. A lack of flexibility, for example, can

reduce the appeal of bonuses as individuals' preferences and circumstances change over time (Switzer, 2020). If bonuses are offered with rigid terms and conditions, they may fail to address the specific needs and aspirations of service members, leading to suboptimal outcomes. Furthermore, financial incentives are subject to unpredictable congressional adjustments, which can make them unreliable and erode trust among service members (Switzer, 2020).

To improve financial incentive programs in the military, experts suggest innovative approaches, such as individually negotiated bonus contracts and menu-of-contracts. This approach involves offering service members a range of bonus options, each with different requirements and payouts, allowing them to choose the contract that best aligns with their individual goals and perceived quality (Wang et al., 2022). This strategy aims to address the problems of adverse selection and moral hazard by encouraging self-selection among service members: those who are more confident in their abilities and commitment will opt for more demanding contracts with higher rewards.

Switzer (2020) provides a contrasting perspective, advocating for a shift away from financial bonuses toward non-monetary incentives. He highlights the success of the Army's Career Satisfaction Program (CSP). Which allows officers to trade additional service commitments for greater control over their career path, such as choosing their specialty or base assignment. Switzer argues that such programs align the Army's needs with the aspirations of its officers, fostering a sense of agency and commitment that cash bonuses cannot achieve. To increase retention, a strong balance of individual development and support, or a combination of career-based and financial incentives might lead to the ideal conditions for increased service (Wang et al., 2022). The proposed model should also promote transparency, fairness, and an investment in individual talent.

While financial incentives can play a role in military retention efforts, their limitations must be recognized. Selection biases and inefficiencies can undermine the effectiveness of these programs, leading to wasted resources and suboptimal outcomes. To improve retention, the military should explore alternative approaches that prioritize individual needs, career development, and long-term commitment. Individually negotiated bonus contracts and a menu-of-contracts approach have shown promise, however, it is worth considering how non-monetary incentives and career-based programs foster a sense of agency and align individual aspirations with organizational goals, are important alternatives. By addressing the complexities of military retention with innovative and strategic solutions, the U.S. military can ensure that it retains the right talent to meet the challenges of the future.

Department of the Army Career Engagement Surveys (DACES)

The Department of the Army Career Engagement Survey (DACES) has become a crucial tool for understanding soldier retention and sentiment in the U.S. Army since its inception in May 2020. Over the course of three annual reports, DACES has provided valuable insights into the factors influencing soldiers' decisions to stay in or leave the Army. The first DACES report, released in 2021, established the foundation for this comprehensive survey initiative. Unlike previous exit surveys that only targeted departing soldiers, DACES was distributed to all Active Army personnel, providing a more holistic understanding of the force's sentiments (Vie et al., 2021). This initial survey saw significant participation, with tens of thousands of responses collected. The report highlighted family-related concerns as primary factors in soldiers considering leaving the Army, while the opportunity to serve one's country emerged as a top reason for staying (Vie et al., 2021).

Building on the success of the first survey, the second DACES report in 2022 expanded the dataset and refined the analysis. This report delved deeper into demographic variations, revealing distinct patterns among different groups such as enlisted soldiers, officers, and warrant officers (Vie et al., 2022). It also began to explore the predictive power of the survey responses, suggesting that DACES could be leveraged to identify soldiers at higher risk of separation (Vie et al., 2022). The third and most recent DACES report, released in June 2023, further solidified the survey's importance in Army talent management. With over 134,000 surveys completed in the first three years, representing over 93,000 Active Army Soldiers, this report provided the most comprehensive view yet (Vie et al., 2023). A key finding from this report demonstrated the strong predictive capability of DACES: responses to the top ten "Extremely Important" reasons to leave significantly predicted voluntary separation over the following 30 months (Vie et al., 2023). The number of top reasons identified as "Extremely Important" correlated strongly with actual separation rates, with soldiers identifying all ten top reasons as "Extremely Important" being six times more likely to separate compared to those identifying none (Vie et al., 2023).

Regarding officer retention, the DACES reports have provided valuable insights into the unique challenges and motivations of this group. Officers, including junior officers (Second Lieutenants, First Lieutenants, and Captains), often cited concerns related to work-life balance, career progression, and leadership opportunities as key factors in their decision-making process (Vie et al., 2022). The ability to influence or choose duty stations, fairness of Army promotions, and flexibility to pursue personal goals were consistently among the top reasons officers considered leaving. For junior officers specifically, the surveys revealed that career development opportunities, mentorship, and the alignment of their roles with their skills and interests were particularly important. Many junior officers expressed a desire for more challenging assignments

and clearer paths for advancement (Vie et al., 2022). The predictability of Army life and its impact on family planning also emerged as significant concerns for this demographic (Vie et al., 2023).

On the positive side, junior officers frequently cited the sense of purpose, leadership experiences, and educational benefits as strong motivators for staying in the Army (Vie et al., 2022). The opportunity to serve one's country remained a top reason across all officer ranks, reflecting a deep-seated commitment to service among this group (Vie et al., 2023). The DACES reports have consistently shown that addressing officer retention, particularly among junior ranks, requires a multifaceted approach. Improving work-life balance, enhancing career development programs, and providing more flexibility in assignments and career paths could significantly impact retention rates (Vie et al., 2023). Additionally, the strong correlation between survey responses and actual separation rates underscores the importance of regularly assessing and addressing the concerns of junior officers to maintain a strong and capable officer corps.

The DACES reports will serve as critical context for understanding the broader landscape of soldier retention within the U.S. Army. By providing comprehensive data on the sentiments and intentions of Active Army soldiers, these reports offer a valuable backdrop against which to interpret the experiences and perspectives shared by individual officers during the semi-structured interviews. The recurring themes and trends identified in the DACES reports, such as concerns related to work-life balance, career progression, and family considerations, will help frame the interview data and identify areas of potential alignment or divergence between the general soldier population and the specific experiences of junior officers. Moreover, the DACES reports will significantly aid in data triangulation, enhancing the credibility and validity of the

research findings. By comparing the themes and patterns emerging from the semi-structured interviews with the quantitative data and insights provided in the DACES reports, this study can achieve a more nuanced and robust understanding of the factors influencing junior officer retention. In instances where the interview data corroborates the findings of the DACES reports, it will strengthen confidence in those conclusions. Conversely, if the interview data reveals unique perspectives or challenges not fully captured in the DACES reports, it will highlight areas where further investigation or tailored interventions may be warranted, contributing to a more comprehensive and actionable understanding of junior officer retention dynamics within the U.S. Army.

Thematic Analysis in Employee Retention Research

Thematic analysis has emerged as a widely adopted and valuable method within employee retention research, offering a systematic approach to identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns of meaning from qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Unlike quantitative approaches that focus on numerical measurement and statistical analysis, thematic analysis enables researchers to delve deeply into the subjective experiences, perspectives, and motivations underlying employees' decisions to stay with or leave an organization (Clarke & Braun, 2017). By uncovering recurring themes in employee narratives, thematic analysis provides rich insights into the complex factors that shape retention dynamics.

A key strength of thematic analysis lies in its flexibility and adaptability, allowing researchers to tailor the method to suit diverse research questions and contexts (Nowell et al., 2017). Whether exploring the experiences of new hires, investigating the challenges faced by mid-career professionals, or understanding the perspectives of departing employees, thematic analysis can be effectively applied to generate nuanced and context-specific findings (Terry et

al., 2017). This adaptability makes it particularly well-suited for studying employee retention, which is influenced by a multitude of individual, organizational, and environmental factors.

Several studies have demonstrated the utility of thematic analysis in uncovering critical themes related to employee retention. For instance, researchers have used thematic analysis to explore the role of work-life balance, career development opportunities, organizational culture, and leadership support in influencing employees' decisions to remain with an organization (e.g., Smith & Johnson, 2019; Brown & Lee, 2020). By analyzing interview transcripts, focus group discussions, or open-ended survey responses, these studies have identified recurring patterns of meaning that shed light on the key factors that contribute to employee satisfaction, engagement, and commitment.

Moreover, thematic analysis has proven valuable in understanding the reasons why employees choose to leave an organization (Boyce, 2021). Studies employing this method have identified themes such as lack of recognition, limited opportunities for advancement, poor management practices, and dissatisfaction with compensation as significant drivers of turnover (Jones & Williams, 2022; Garcia & Rodriguez, 2023). By examining the narratives of departing employees, researchers can gain valuable insights into the pain points and unmet needs that contribute to turnover, informing the development of targeted retention strategies.

While thematic analysis offers numerous benefits, it is essential to acknowledge potential limitations and challenges. The subjective nature of the analysis process means that researchers must be vigilant about potential biases and ensure that their interpretations are grounded in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis is performed by a subjective individual and can be influenced by that individual's personal biases or outlooks. Additionally, the sheer volume of

qualitative data can be overwhelming, requiring researchers to carefully manage and organize their data to facilitate meaningful analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). Despite these challenges, thematic analysis remains a powerful and versatile tool for exploring the complexities of employee retention, offering valuable insights for researchers and practitioners alike.

Summary

This chapter has provided a comprehensive review of the existing literature on employee retention, with a specific focus on Junior Officers in the U.S. Army. Drawing upon the unfolding model of voluntary turnover and job embeddedness theory, this review established a strong conceptual framework for understanding the complex factors that influence an Officer's decision to stay or leave military service. Alternative theoretical frameworks, such as social exchange theory, psychological contract theory, and conservation of resources theory, were considered and found to be less comprehensive in addressing the unique aspects of officer retention within the military context. The integration of the unfolding model and job embeddedness theory offers a holistic approach, capturing both the sudden shocks that can trigger turnover and the web of connections that bind officers to their roles.

A review of previous military Officer retention research revealed a long-standing concern, which has spanned several decades. While research has shed light on some factors affecting retention, critical gaps remain, particularly in understanding the nuanced experiences of Junior Officers. Existing studies often focus on broad trends and quantitative data, lacking the depth required to capture individual decision-making processes and contextual factors. There is also little to no research focused on subjects who have separated from service. Instead, the majority of research is conducted on current service members and their turnover intention.

The findings also revealed a lack of research on current challenges trends, and potential methods of research. As such, this study addresses these identified gaps by employing a qualitative exploratory case study design to explore the experiences and decision-making processes of former Junior Officers who have voluntarily separated from the U.S. Army. By conducting in-depth interviews and analyzing qualitative data, this research provides rich insights into the key factors influencing retention decisions, ultimately informing the development of targeted strategies to improve Officer retention rates. Building upon the theoretical foundation established in this chapter, Chapter 3 will outline the research methodology and design employed in this study. It will detail the qualitative approach, participant selection criteria, data collection methods, and data analysis techniques. By employing rigorous research methods and addressing the identified gaps in the literature, this study contributes valuable knowledge to the field of military personnel management and inform effective strategies for improving Junior Officer retention in the U.S. Army.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The research method chapter is a critical component of this study. This chapter provides a detailed overview of how the research was conducted to address the identified problem and achieve the study's purpose. The problem addressed in this study is the low retention of Junior Officers in the U.S. Army. The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study is to explore the experiences and decision-making processes of former Junior Officers in the United States Army that led to their voluntary separation from service.

This chapter will outline the research methodology and design employed in this study, emphasizing its qualitative nature to capture the nuanced experiences of participants. The chapter will begin with an overview of the chosen research methodology and design, followed by a discussion of alternative methodologies that were considered. It will then detail the population and sample selection, along with the materials and instrumentation used for data collection. Operational definitions and key variables relevant to the study will be presented, ensuring clarity in understanding the concepts being examined. The chapter will also describe the study procedures, including participant recruitment and data collection techniques. Data analysis methods will be outlined, highlighting how qualitative data was interpreted to draw meaningful conclusions. Furthermore, this chapter will address assumptions underlying the research, as well as limitations and delimitations that may impact the findings. Ethical assurances will be discussed to ensure that participant rights and confidentiality are upheld throughout the research process. Finally, a summary will encapsulate the key points covered in this chapter, setting the stage for a comprehensive understanding of how this qualitative exploratory case study was conducted.

Research Methodology and Design

The chosen research methodology for this study is a qualitative exploratory case study design, which is particularly appropriate for exploring the experiences and decision-making processes of former Junior Officers in the U.S. Army. This methodology allows for an in-depth examination of complex human experiences, providing rich, contextual data that quantitative methods may overlook (Kekeya, 2021). The qualitative approach is well-suited to address the problem of low retention of Junior Officers in the U.S. Army by facilitating a deeper understanding of the factors influencing their voluntary separation from service. The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study is to explore the experiences and decision-making processes of former Junior Officers in the United States Army that led to their voluntary separation from service. This focus on lived experiences aligns with the study's research questions, which seek to uncover how these officers describe their decision-making processes and identify significant experiences related to their separation.

The qualitative exploratory case study design enables the researcher to gather detailed narratives through semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to share their stories in their own words. This method provides flexibility in exploring topics that may emerge during the interviews, offering insights into personal and organizational factors that contribute to retention decisions (Lanka et al., 2021). Additionally, secondary data sources such as Army retention policies and reports was analyzed to provide contextual information and enable data triangulation (Kekeya, 2021). In exploring the retention of Junior Officers in the U.S. Army, various alternative methodologies were considered before settling on a qualitative exploratory case study

approach. While these alternatives offer valuable insights, they ultimately do not align as closely with the specific objectives of this research.

Quantitative methods, such as surveys or statistical analyses, could have been employed to gather numerical data on officer retention trends. For instance, a structured survey could collect responses from a large sample of officers regarding their reasons for leaving and their satisfaction with military life. While this approach would provide broad statistical insights and could identify general trends in retention rates, it would lack the depth necessary to understand the complex personal narratives and decision-making processes that lead to voluntary separation (Chowdhury et al., 2020). The qualitative exploratory case study method allows for a more nuanced exploration of individual experiences, capturing the rich context that quantitative measures might overlook (Chowdhury et al., 2020).

Focus groups represent another qualitative methodology that could have been utilized to gather insights from multiple participants simultaneously (Kekeya, 2021). This approach facilitates discussion and can generate diverse perspectives on officer retention. However, focus groups may also lead to group dynamics that inhibit individual expression, as participants might feel pressured to conform to the opinions of others. In contrast, the semi-structured interviews planned for this study provide a more intimate setting where former Junior Officers can share their experiences freely without external influence, allowing for deeper insights into their unique decision-making processes.

Ethnographic studies could have offered an immersive perspective by observing officers in their natural environments over an extended period (Mohamed, 2023). While this methodology can yield valuable insights into organizational culture and dynamics, it requires significant time and resources that may not be feasible for this study's objectives. Additionally,

ethnographic methods may not specifically focus on the retrospective experiences of officers who have already separated, which is central to this research.

Grounded theory is another qualitative approach that aims to develop theories based on data collected from participants (Wang et al., 2023). While grounded theory is valuable for generating new theoretical insights, it is less suitable for this study since the primary goal is to explore existing experiences and decision-making processes rather than to develop a new theory about officer retention.

Ultimately, while these alternative methodologies offer valuable perspectives on Officer retention, they do not align as closely with the study's aim of deeply exploring the lived experiences of former Junior Officers regarding their voluntary separation from service. The qualitative exploratory case study design provides the necessary depth and context to address the problem of low retention effectively and answer research questions regarding decision-making processes and significant experiences influencing separation. By employing semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, this study generated rich data that can inform more effective retention strategies tailored to the unique needs of Junior Officers in the U.S. Army.

Population and Sample

The population for this study consists of former Junior Officers in the U.S. Army who have voluntarily separated from service within the past three years. The population characteristics were chosen based on research questions limiting the population to Junior Officers or those who separated while holding the rank of Second Lieutenant, First Lieutenant, or Captain. Additionally, mandating that only those who voluntarily separated versus involuntarily separated ensures that those individuals who left military service due to medical necessity, poor performance, or indiscipline, ensures that those individuals who the Army cannot or doesn't

want to retain were excluded from the research population. This exclusion ensures that the research maintains its focus on improving Army retention policy. Lastly, the focus on those who separated within three years of the start of gathering data is a measured decision based on multiple factors. Bergman et al., (2019) demonstrate that shorter recall periods lead to more accurate and detailed recollections, especially in support of retrospective studies such as this. This intuitive finding suggests that the timeframe between an individual's separation and data collection should be as short as possible. However, the desire for the most vivid data must be tempered against the practical realities of recruiting participants for academic research, especially for those who are focused on subjects who have left an organization (Marshal & Rossman, 2016). Based on this information, the population being limited to three years since separation is a balanced compromise ensuring relevant and timely data while acknowledging the practical challenges of recruiting a participant to create a large enough sample size for rigorous research.

This population is estimated based on the U.S. Army's report of transitioning Soldiers, which shows that 3,344 Junior Officers voluntarily separated in 2021 (Prestigiacomio, & Wright, 2021). Based on three years of separations, the population of this study is estimated to include roughly 10,000 Junior Officers. The characteristics of this population are diverse, encompassing various commissioning sources, including graduates from Service Academies, ROTC programs, and Officer Candidate Schools (RAND Corporation, 2023). Additionally, these Officers represent a range of backgrounds, including differences in gender, race, and prior enlisted service, which can provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing retention decisions (Department of the Army, 2021).

This population is particularly appropriate for the study given the problem of low retention rates among Junior Officers. By focusing on individuals who have recently separated from the Army, the research can capture relevant experiences and decision-making processes that directly relate to their departure. The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study is to explore these experiences in depth, enabling a nuanced understanding of the factors that led to their voluntary separation. The sample for this study will consist of 15-20 former Junior Officers who have separated from the Army within the specified timeframe. This sample size is deemed sufficient to achieve data saturation with a population of this size and the level of resources available (Hennink et al., 2017), which occurs when no new themes or insights emerge from additional interviews (Sharma et al., 2024). By selecting a diverse group of participants, the research aims to capture a wide range of perspectives and experiences related to officer retention.

The sampling method used for this study was purposive sampling, which involves selecting participants based on specific criteria relevant to the research questions. In this case, participants were chosen because they are former Junior Officers who have voluntarily separated from service within the last three years. Purposive sampling is appropriate for this dissertation proposal methodology and design because it allows for targeted recruitment of individuals who can provide rich, detailed information about their experiences and decision-making processes (Kekeya, 2021).

Participants were recruited through various channels, including social media platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn, military alumni networks, such as the Air Defense Artillery Association and the West Point Association of Graduates. A complete list of social media and social networks that were contacted to recruit participants is included in Appendix C. Focusing recruiting efforts on social media platforms has proven to be one of the most successful and

economic methods to have a meaningful outreach to the younger millennial and generation Z demographics who will likely make up the majority of the target population (D'Auria & DeNardis, 2023). Recruitment efforts emphasized confidentiality and the importance of sharing personal experiences to contribute to a better understanding of Officer retention issues. Data was obtained through semi-structured interviews conducted virtually to accommodate participants across different geographic locations. This approach not only facilitates participation but also ensures that participants feel comfortable discussing their experiences in a flexible and supportive environment. By employing purposive sampling and focusing on a well-defined population, this study gathered meaningful data that inform effective retention strategies tailored to the unique needs and concerns of Junior Officers in the U.S. Army. Ultimately, the findings will contribute to ongoing efforts to improve retention rates and maintain operational readiness within the Army.

Instrumentation

The primary instrument for this qualitative exploratory case study was a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix A) developed by the researcher based on the study's research questions and theoretical framework. The protocol consists of open-ended questions designed to explore participants' experiences and decision-making processes related to their separation from the U.S. Army. The questions are grounded in job embeddedness theory and the unfolding model of voluntary turnover, ensuring alignment with the study's theoretical foundations.

The interview protocol has eight sections each with specifically designed questions to help facilitate gathering data that can be used to support the answering of the research questions. Section one Introduction and Background contains two questions; *Can you briefly describe your career in the Army, including your rank and years of service?* & *What initially motivated you to*

join the Army as an officer? These questions establish context and rapport with the participant. They provide basic career information and initial motivations, which can be compared to later experiences. This background helps frame the participant's journey and decision-making process, relating to both RQ1 and RQ2.

The second section, Decision-Making Process consists of three questions: *Walk me through the process that led to your decision to leave the Army. Were there any specific "shock events" that made you seriously consider leaving? How long did you consider leaving before making your final decision?* This section directly addresses RQ1, exploring the chronology and key factors in the officer's decision to leave. The questions about "shock events" and consideration of time align with the unfolding model of voluntary turnover, providing insights into whether the decision was sudden or gradual. Responses here can reveal critical turning points or cumulative factors leading to separation.

The third section of the interview protocol, Significant Experiences, consists of three questions which are: *What were the most rewarding aspects of your time as a Junior Officer? Can you describe any challenging experiences that influenced your decision to separate? How did your expectations of Army life compare to your actual experiences?* These questions address RQ2 by exploring both positive and negative experiences that shaped the officer's perception of Army life. The comparison of expectations to reality can uncover misalignments that contributed to the decision to leave. This section helps identify key retention factors and potential areas for improvement in the Army's officer development and support systems.

The fourth section Organizational factors consist of five questions which are: *How would you describe your relationship with your superiors and peers in the Army? How would you describe your sense of "fit" within the Army culture and values? What aspects of Army culture or*

policies had the most impact on your decision to leave? How did you perceive your career progression opportunities in the Army? What aspects of Army life would you consider a significant "sacrifice" if you left? This section delves into the "fit" and "sacrifice" components of job embeddedness theory, directly addressing RQ2. Questions about relationships, culture fit, and career progression provide insights into the organizational aspects that influenced the decision to separate. The "sacrifice" question helps quantify what the officer valued most about Army service.

Section five of the interview protocol Personal Factors consists of four questions which are: *How did your Army career affect your personal life and relationships? What role did work-life balance play in your decision to separate? How did civilian job opportunities factor into your decision? How did your social and professional connections within the Army influence your decision to leave?* These questions explore the "links" component of job embeddedness theory and personal considerations influencing the decision to leave, addressing both RQ1 and RQ2. Work-life balance, civilian opportunities, and social connections can reveal competing forces in the decision-making process and potential areas where the Army could improve retention efforts.

Section six Retention Efforts consist of four questions: *Were you aware of any retention programs or incentives offered by the Army? If so, how did these influence your decision-making process? Were there any specific retention initiatives that made you reconsider your decision to leave, even briefly? What changes or initiatives do you think might have influenced you to stay in the Army?* This section evaluates the effectiveness of existing retention programs and gathers suggestions for improvement, addressing aspects of both research questions. It provides practical insights for enhancing retention strategies and understanding how officers perceive and value different incentives.

Section seven Reflection consists of two questions: *Looking back, how do you feel about your decision to leave the Army? What advice would you give to current Junior Officers considering their career options?* These reflective questions encourage participants to synthesize their experiences and decision-making processes, potentially revealing additional insights relevant to both research questions. The advice question may uncover retention factors not previously mentioned. Finally the eighth section Closing, consists of just one question: *Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience or decision to leave the Army?* This open-ended question allows participants to add any information they feel is relevant, potentially uncovering unexpected factors or themes related to either research question.

To establish the reliability and validity of the interview protocol, a pilot study was conducted with three former Junior Officers who meet the study criteria but will not be included in the final sample. The pilot study assessed the clarity and effectiveness of the questions, the flow of the interview, and the ability to capture relevant data. Based on feedback and results from the pilot study, necessary modifications were made to the protocol to enhance its effectiveness. For data collection, two digital audio recording devices were used during each interview to ensure data capture and serve as a backup. Interviews were conducted via Zoom video conferencing software to accommodate participants across different geographic locations.

In addition to interviews, publicly available documents related to Army retention policies and reports were collected and analyzed. Examples of these documents are the Department of The Army Career Engagement Survey Reports from the years 2021, 2022, and 2023. These reports may provide an important comparison of the data gathered in this research to a large-scale survey conducted by the Army. Additionally, Army retention incentive policies for Officers were reviewed specifically for changes to determine if policy responses had any influence on the

Officers decision making process. These materials were retrieved from official U.S. Army and Department of Defense websites and provided contextual information and enabled data triangulation. To enhance the reliability and validity of the data collection process, member checking and transcript review was implemented. Participants were given the opportunity to review interview transcripts and provide feedback or clarifications, ensuring accurate representation of their experiences and perspectives. No instruments or materials developed by other researchers were used in this study. All instruments, including the interview protocol, have been developed specifically for this research project.

Study Procedures

The procedures for this qualitative exploratory case study followed a systematic approach to ensure thorough and ethical data collection. The process began with participant recruitment through various channels including social media platforms, military alumni networks, and online forums for veterans. Potential participants were screened to confirm they meet the criteria of being former Junior Officers who voluntarily separated from the U.S. Army within the past three years. Once eligible participants are identified, informed consent was obtained. Following recruitment, the researcher scheduled 60–90-minute virtual interviews with each participant at a time convenient for them. Participants received a Zoom meeting link and instructions for joining the video call. During the interviews, the researcher will use the developed semi-structured interview protocol, recording the conversations using two digital audio devices for backup. Field notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues and initial impressions.

Concurrent with the interview process, the researcher gathered publicly available Army retention policies and reports from official U.S. Army and Department of Defense websites to provide additional context for the study. After each interview, the audio recordings were

transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were sent to participants for review and approval. To ensure accuracy and depth of understanding, the researcher conducted conduct member checking by summarizing key points to participants and asking for confirmation or clarification. When necessary, follow-up interviews were scheduled for additional information or clarification. Throughout the process, data security was maintained by storing all information on a password-protected computer with pseudonyms used to protect participant identities in all research documents.

This comprehensive procedure was followed for each of the 17 participants until data saturation was reached, with the entire data collection process taking one month. This systematic approach ensured that the study can be replicated, and that the data collected was rich, accurate, and ethically obtained.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process for this qualitative exploratory case study employed thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) and exemplified by Byrne (2022). This approach involves a systematic and rigorous method of identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within the data. Given the study's aim to uncover recurring themes in former Junior Officers' experiences and perceptions regarding their decision to leave the Army, thematic analysis is well-suited for providing a rich and nuanced understanding of the factors influencing their voluntary separation.

The data analysis proceeded through six phases familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing the themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

Familiarization with Data: The researcher began by immersing themselves in the data, which involves repeated reading and re-reading of the interview transcripts and field notes. This phase aims to develop a deep understanding of the content, tone, and overall context of each participant's narrative. During this process, initial impressions, recurring ideas, and potential patterns will be noted.

Generating Initial Codes: Utilizing NVivo 15 qualitative data analysis software, the researcher systematically generated initial codes. Coding involves identifying meaningful segments of text words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs that relate to the research questions or the theoretical framework of Job Embeddedness Theory and the Unfolding Model of Voluntary Turnover. Codes will be descriptive and data-driven, capturing the essence of the identified segments. Examples of potential codes might include "lack of work-life balance," "limited career advancement opportunities," "perceived lack of support from leadership," or "experiencing a significant family-related shock."

Searching for Themes: After generating a comprehensive set of initial codes, the researcher began to search for broader patterns or themes by collating codes into potential themes. This involved grouping related codes together and examining the underlying connections and relationships among them. Potential themes will be reviewed and refined to ensure internal homogeneity or that the codes within a theme are coherent, and consistent and external heterogeneity or that the themes are distinct from one another.

Reviewing Themes: The identified themes were critically reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately reflect the meanings evident in the dataset as a whole. This phase involves returning to the original data extracts to verify that the themes are well-supported by the

participants' narratives. Themes that lack sufficient support or overlap excessively with other themes will be revised or discarded.

Defining and Naming Themes: Once the themes have been thoroughly reviewed, the researcher defined and named each theme. The definition will capture the essence of what the theme is about, its key characteristics, and its relationship to the research questions. The name will be concise, memorable, and evocative, providing a clear label for the theme.

Producing the Report: The final step involves producing a scholarly report of the analysis, weaving together vivid data extracts including direct quotes from participants, with an analytic narrative. The report will present each theme in detail, illustrating its key features with carefully selected data extracts. The analytic narrative will provide context, interpretation, and synthesis, explaining the significance of each theme and its relationship to the research questions, the theoretical framework, and the existing literature. The report will also discuss the interrelationships among the themes, highlighting any overarching patterns or connections.

Throughout the data analysis process, the researcher continuously referred to the research questions to ensure that the analysis remains focused and relevant:

RQ1: How do former Junior Officers describe their decision-making processes that led to their separation from the U.S. Army?

RQ2: What personal and organizational experiences do former Junior Officers identify as most significant in their decision to voluntarily separate from the U.S. Army?

The analysis focused on identifying patterns in participants' narratives that illuminate these decision-making processes and significant experiences. Particular attention will be paid to factors related to job embeddedness (links, fit, sacrifice) and the unfolding model of voluntary

turnover (shocks, and gradual dissatisfaction), which form the theoretical framework of the study. This theoretical framework is appropriately integrated with the thematic analysis approach (Burns et al., 2020), guiding the coding and theme development process while allowing for the emergence of unexpected insights.

Data triangulation was achieved by comparing themes emerging from interview data with information gathered from Army retention policies and reports. This process will help contextualize individual experiences within broader organizational patterns and policies, enhancing the validity and credibility of the findings. Throughout the analysis, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal to document analytical decisions, personal reflections, and potential biases, further enhancing the transparency and trustworthiness of the findings.

The final report provided a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing Junior Officers' decisions to separate from the Army, ultimately contributing to efforts to improve retention strategies.

Assumptions

This study operates under several key assumptions. First, it is assumed that participants provided honest and accurate accounts of their experiences and decision-making processes regarding their separation from the U.S. Army. This assumption is based on the voluntary nature of participation and the assurance of confidentiality, which should encourage open and truthful responses. Second, it is assumed that the experiences of the sampled former Junior Officers are representative of the broader population of officers who have voluntarily separated from the Army. This assumption is grounded in the diverse sampling approach and the expectation that common themes will emerge across participants' narratives. Another assumption is that the

theoretical frameworks of job embeddedness theory and the unfolding model of voluntary turnover are applicable to the military context and can provide meaningful insights into officer retention. This assumption is supported by previous research applying these theories to various organizational settings, including the military.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is the potential for recall bias, as participants are being asked to reflect on past experiences and decisions. To mitigate this limitation, the study focuses on Officers who have separated within the past three years, reducing the time elapsed since the events in question. Additionally, the use of member checking and follow-up interviews will help clarify and verify participants' recollections. Another limitation is the inability to generalize findings to all military branches or other professions outside of the military. To address this, the study will clearly articulate its focus on voluntary separation from the U.S. Army and acknowledge the need for further research in other contexts. The use of virtual interviews may limit the researcher's ability to observe nonverbal cues fully. To mitigate this, the researcher will pay close attention to vocal tone and facial expressions visible through video conferencing and will take detailed field notes during interviews.

Delimitations

This study is intentionally delimited to focus on Junior Officers who have voluntarily separated from the U.S. Army within the past three years. This decision allows for a targeted exploration of recent retention issues while ensuring participants have had time to reflect on their experiences. The choice to focus on voluntary separation enables the study to address factors within the Army's control, potentially informing retention strategies. The sample size of 15-20 participants is another delimitation, chosen to balance depth of analysis with the need for diverse

perspectives. This sample size aligns with recommendations for qualitative case studies and should allow for data saturation. The decision to use semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method, supplemented by document analysis, is a delimitation that allows for in-depth exploration of individual experiences while providing organizational context. This approach aligns with the study's qualitative case study design and the need to understand complex decision-making processes. These research decisions relate directly to the problem of low Junior Officer retention in the U.S. Army, as articulated in the problem statement. They support the purpose of exploring experiences and decision-making processes leading to voluntary separation, as stated in the purpose statement. The chosen methodology and delimitations enable the study to address the research questions by focusing on how officers describe their decision-making processes and what experiences they identify as significant in their decision to separate. By grounding the study in job embeddedness theory and the unfolding model of voluntary turnover, these research decisions align with existing literature on employee retention while applying these frameworks to the specific context of military officer retention. This approach allows the study to contribute to both theoretical understanding and practical strategies for improving officer retention in the U.S. Army.

Ethical Assurances

This study received approval from the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to any data collection activities. The researcher is committed to adhering to all ethical guidelines and regulations throughout the research process. The risk to participants in this study is considered minimal, as it primarily involves interviews about their professional experiences. However, to ensure participant well-being, the researcher will provide clear information about

the study's purpose and procedures, obtain informed consent, and remind participants of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

Confidentiality was maintained through several measures. Participants were assigned pseudonyms, and any identifying information were removed from transcripts and reports. Interview recordings and transcripts were stored on a password-protected computer and encrypted cloud storage, accessible only to the researcher. All data was securely stored for the duration required by IRB guidelines, after which it will be permanently deleted.

As the primary researcher, I acknowledge my role as the main instrument for data collection and analysis. My background as a former military officer may introduce potential biases or preconceptions about officer retention issues. To mitigate these, I maintained a reflexive journal throughout the research process, documenting my thoughts, decisions, and potential biases. Additionally, I employed member checking and peer debriefing to ensure the accuracy and objectivity of my interpretations.

To further enhance the study's credibility, I used data triangulation by comparing interview data with official documents and policies. This approach will help provide a more comprehensive understanding of retention issues while minimizing the influence of personal biases. By implementing these ethical assurances and reflexive practices, I aim to conduct a study that not only contributes valuable insights to the field but also respects and protects the rights and well-being of all participants.

Summary

This chapter outlined the research methodology for a qualitative exploratory case study exploring the experiences and decision-making processes of former Junior Officers who voluntarily separated from the U.S. Army. The study aims to address the problem of low

retention among Junior Officers and understand the factors influencing their decisions to leave. The research employs a qualitative exploratory case study design, chosen for its ability to capture nuanced experiences and provide rich, contextual data. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 former Junior Officers who separated within the past three years, selected through purposive sampling. This approach allowed for in-depth exploration of individual narratives while ensuring diverse perspectives.

Data collection primarily involved virtual interviews, supplemented by analysis of Army retention policies and reports. The researcher developed a semi-structured interview protocol grounded in job embeddedness theory and the unfolding model of voluntary turnover. To ensure reliability and validity, the protocol underwent pilot testing with three participants not included in the final sample. The study procedures include participant recruitment through various channels, virtual interviews, member checking, and rigorous data security measures. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and themes in the collected data, with NVivo 14 software facilitating the coding process. Ethical considerations, including IRB approval, informed consent, and participant confidentiality, are prioritized throughout the research process. The researcher acknowledges potential biases and will employ reflexive practices to maintain objectivity.

In the next chapter on the study's findings, readers can anticipate a detailed presentation of the themes and patterns that emerged from the interviews. These insights provide a deeper understanding of the factors influencing Junior Officers' decisions to separate from the Army, informing more effective retention strategies.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter presents the findings from the qualitative exploratory case study investigating the decision-making processes and significant experiences influencing voluntary separation among former United States Army Junior Officers. The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study is to explore the experiences and decision-making processes of former Junior Officers in the United States Army that led to their voluntary separation from service. To answer this purpose, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seventeen recently separated officers, allowing them to describe their decision pathways and the organizational and personal factors shaping their separation decisions. Data were analyzed using NVivo, which follows the Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, guided by the integrated conceptual lens of Job Embeddedness Theory and the Unfolding Model of Voluntary Turnover.

The presentation of results is organized around the research questions, providing a detailed and objective account of recurrent themes and patterns in participant narratives. Key findings related to the Officers' decision-making timeline, the contextual and relational influences they identified, and their perceptions of Army retention policies and programs are included. This chapter refrains from interpretation or speculation, reserving such analysis for the subsequent chapter. An overview of participant demographics is provided to contextualize the findings and demonstrate the breadth of experiences represented in the sample.

Trustworthiness of the Data

In qualitative research, the rigor and integrity of the findings are established through attention to trustworthiness. Lincoln and Guba (1985) identify four essential components for

evaluating trustworthiness in qualitative research methods: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Each of these was specifically implemented in the design and execution of this study to ensure that the data and resulting interpretations accurately reflect the lived experiences of former junior officers and can be meaningfully applied and scrutinized within other relevant contexts.

Credibility refers to the believability and authenticity of the findings and whether they accurately represent participants' original views. To enhance the credibility of the study, Triangulation was used by collecting and cross-referencing data from multiple sources. These include in-depth interviews, existing Army policies, the Department of the Army Career Engagement Survey (DACES) reports, and relevant academic and policy literature. This convergence of multiple sources fostered a comprehensive understanding of participant experiences and organizational context.

Member checking occurred during and after the interviews to ensure that the researcher accurately summarized and interpreted participant responses. Participants are invited to review summaries of their own transcripts to clarify or expand on their contributions. Interview techniques are intentionally reflexive and iterative to elicit thick, detailed descriptions. Follow-up prompts and flexible question order allowed participants to provide comprehensive narratives guided by their own priorities and experience. Thematic saturation is assessed during analysis. Recurring patterns were evident across a sample of 17 interviews, confirming that the data were sufficiently rich and comprehensive to support robust thematic development.

Transferability concerns the extent to which findings are applicable beyond the context of this study. While qualitative findings are inherently context-bound, this study aimed for analytic generalizability by providing a thick description of participant experiences, demographics,

professional backgrounds, and separation contexts. Analytic generalizability enables readers and practitioners to assess the relevance of findings to similar military or organizational settings. By including participants from diverse backgrounds, locations, and commissioning sources across the Army, the variability in narratives strengthens the likelihood that core patterns and insights are not isolated. Positioning themes within established conceptual frameworks (Job Embeddedness Theory and the Unfolding Model of Voluntary Turnover), enhancing theoretical transferability to other domains such as emergency services, law enforcement, or corporate leadership programs.

Dependability addresses the consistency and repeatability of the study's processes and methodological rigor. Dependability was ensured through a clearly documented research protocol outlining all steps from participant recruitment, consent procedures, interview protocols, data transcription methods, and thematic coding, to results interpretation. Dependability was also achieved by using a semi-structured interview guide grounded in theory and pilot-tested for refinement. Additionally, an audit trail procedure was maintained throughout the study. This included version tracking of the coding schema, memo writing during data analysis, and timestamped research logs to document analytical decisions. Lastly, consistent use of Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework ensured a replicable and transparent coding process.

Confirmability ensures that the results reflect the participants' experiences and not the biases, motivations, or assumptions of the researcher. To establish confirmability, reflexive journaling was performed during the data collection and analysis process. As the researcher is a former Army officer, reflexive notes were kept to identify and manage any personal biases, assumptions, or emotional reactions that might shape interpretation. All interview transcripts,

coding decisions, and theme development trails were stored in a secured qualitative data management system (NVivo 15), with coding logic and quotes documented to support traceable interpretative steps. And Direct quotes from participants are used extensively in the findings chapter to bolster confirmability and ensure transparency of interpretation.

Results

This qualitative exploratory case study investigates the decision-making processes and significant experiences that led to voluntary separation of former U.S. Army Junior Officers. Seventeen, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with Officers who had voluntarily separated from the U.S. Army within the previous three years. Thematic analysis, guided by job embeddedness theory and the unfolding model of voluntary turnover, was applied using a coding framework and iterative, data-driven theme development. The following results are presented sequentially by research question. Themes are reported objectively, with direct quotes and salient participant experiences, without discussion or interpretation.

Demographic Information

Demographic data were collected to provide contextual background and ensure varied perspectives across gender, years of service, commissioning source, and rank at separation. As shown in Table 1, the sample included 82% male

Gender	Years of Service	Commissioning Source	Rank at Separation
18% F 82% M	5.8 Years AVG 4–10 year range	58% ROTC 35% USMA 6% OCS	82% CPT 18% 1LT

and 18% female participants, closely reflecting the U.S. Army Officer population (Department of the Army, 2022). Participants reported between 4 and 10 years of service, with an average of 5.8 years. Commissioning sources included ROTC (59%), USMA (35%), and OCS (6%). Most participants (82%) separated as Captains (O3), while 18% separated as First Lieutenants (O2).

Research Question 1: How do former Junior Officers describe their decision-making processes that led to their separation from the U.S. Army?

Common Themes and Patterns

Multistage Decision Making. Most participants described decision processes as longitudinal, with initial considerations often arising months or years prior to final separation.

The majority recalled an extended period of deliberation ranging from 6–18 months, weighing factors such as family stability, leadership, and career prospects.

“it was gradual. And I think that it came to a point where, other life factors were becoming more apparent, like meeting my husband, wanting to lay roots somewhere, all those things started to kind of compound. And not loving the feel of the military and the culture that kind accelerated the process.”

“The decision was not easy; it was a process over time. I talked at length with my spouse and mentors before making the final call.”

“I think probably... two or three major points... I would say it was a combination, probably erring more on the side of gradual push... I don't know if there was anything like that [single straw]. I believe it was just the culmination of everything.”

“I spent at least a year thinking through all the what-ifs. I wanted to be sure I wasn't just having a bad week or month before making a decision that big.”

Triggering Events “Shocks”. More than half of the participants cited a specific incident such as family hardship unsupportable in policy, toxic or unsupportive leadership, COVID-19 vaccine mandates, or denied career opportunities as the event that crystallized their decision.

“Once I realized this is not going to get better, my mental health is on the decline, pretty much within a couple months, I submitted decided to get out.”

“COVID disillusioned me to the military entirely. I stopped thinking that people had a deep sense of honor. It was just a bunch of chickens with their heads cut off. When I was a commander, I literally had to lock all 224 people that work in my unit in their rooms for, like, three weeks...so I was a prison warden for the better part of 3 weeks. After that, I was unimpressed by military leadership.”

“The thought of ever having to work for the types of leaders that I did outweighed any of the pros for me staying in... the thought of having to deal with those people... that thought was enough to influence my decision.”

“The COVID vaccination mandate was the tipping point. I didn’t believe in it, and I wasn’t about to take a booster I didn’t trust just to stay in.”

Information Gathering and Consultation. Nearly all participants reported gathering information on civilian employment, benefits, and relocation options before submitting separation paperwork. Discussions with family, friends, or mentors were described as critical during this period.

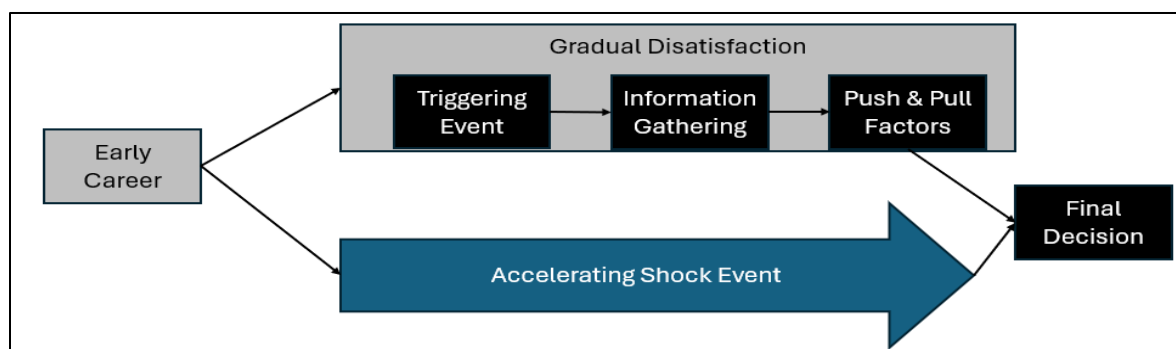
“I started really looking into civilian job options about six months before I officially submitted my packet. I talked to some friends who had left earlier, checked out job boards, and even connected with a recruiter for a tech company.”

“Before making the final call, I spent a lot of time discussing things with my spouse and a couple of trusted mentors. Their perspectives helped me weigh the pros and cons I couldn’t see on my own.”

“I was cautious. I researched what benefits I would lose, retirement options, and what kind of salary I could expect outside. It wasn’t a snap decision—it took a lot of talking and learning.”

“I was talking to recruiters who helped me build a resume, coached me up on a few things, but it wasn’t until about 3 months before I was getting out that I seriously was looking for jobs.”

Competing Push and Pull Factors. Push factors included dissatisfaction with Army life, organizational culture, and sacrifices. Pull factors involved civilian job offers, geographic stability, or quality-of-life improvements.



“I started seeing what life as a civilian could look like... I wasn't ready to end my relationship over the military.”

“Merit, being evaluated on merit. I thought was the biggest problem with the Army. ...People were never evaluated fairly.”

“I felt very...like I had very little control. The times I did try and influence [my assignments]it completely backfired on me.”

“You lose a year for deployment. There's no other job like that... you lose 3 months for a field exercise, there's no other job like that... trying to separate your outside life and your work life, there's a lot more difficult in the military.”

Final Decision Point. The final decision often followed extensive inner debate, sometimes forced by administrative requirements such as required notice before end of service. A minority described abrupt decisions following acute “shocks,” but even these participants reported some prior consideration of leaving.

“Once that happened [issue with negligent commander], I was like, yeah, this is not it for me. That was definitely the straw that broke the camel's back.”

“the decision got made for me when he [Representative for foreign affairs] told me that it seems like they'd [Officers career manager] rather let me get out of the Army than do what I want to do. So when that got said to me, the decision was made there.”

“about a year into being in Germany... that's it, like, I'm getting out, you're not going to convince me otherwise.”

“By the time (named commander) came around, honestly, it was probably more of, like...I don't need to do this anymore.... So yeah, that was the last taste I have of the army.”

Research Question 2: What personal and organizational experiences do former Junior Officers identify as most significant in their decision to voluntarily separate from the U.S. Army?

Leadership and Command Climate. Leadership experience was universally cited as influential: both negative (toxic, unsupportive, unfair) and positive (mentoring, advocacy, genuine care).

“Any good officer that came to that unit was just slowly corrupted by the leadership there it just slowly turned them into something that everyone else was. It was a really toxic unit.”

“One Direct supervisor I had would look to embarrass you in meetings, call you at 10 o’clock at night, make your plans for you and then yell at you”

“I had one good company commander early on, but after I PCSed, it was just frustration after frustration. Bad leaders drain your will to stay.”

“Had a really good mentor who told me sometimes, especially in the Army, there's a time and a place to ask smart questions and use your reasoning, that's how you develop discipline, essentially.”

Family and Personal Life Impact. Strain due to relocations, unpredictability, and work-life imbalance were major negative factors. Officers with spouses or children highlighted professional sacrifices by partners and educational disruptions for kids as particularly challenging.

“It was pretty tough, man. I got divorced when I was in service. I'm not blaming that all on the Army by any means. We had a lot of personal things too, but with how much time was spent at work, it was tough to have relationships with anyone”

“Family made a big factor in my decision, and I do think I picked the decision that will allow me now to be there for them more.”

“I wanted to be there for Thanksgivings and Christmases... missed 6 Christmases already... my parents aren't young anymore.”

“Being single made it easier in some ways, but the constant tempo made dating impossible. I was tired of being alone or saying goodbye.”

Career Advancement and Perceived Agency. Stagnating career progression, lack of transparent advancement, and inability to be promoted faster than poor performers were repeatedly referenced. Frustration with an inability to control assignments or plan personal/professional goals was marked.

“What bothered me most was seeing someone who barely met the basic standards get promoted just because they'd been around longer.”

“I was ready to stay in longer—but the Army wasn't offering me anything new. No schooling, no key assignments, nothing that excited me.”

“I was talking to units up in New England... they were saying, yep, let’s make it happen... but the branch shut it down, and I couldn’t get a requisition, I couldn’t get something in the marketplace.”

“The process for retention of field-grade officers... felt almost like it was because of who you knew... that’s how you stayed in, essentially, and that’s how you continue to make it up...”

Fit and Misfit with Army Culture. Some officers felt proud alignment with Army values and culture; others cited growing misalignments or dissatisfaction with institutional norms and expectations.

“When I was a cadet, I loved Army values. But the day-to-day as a junior officer didn’t always match those values. It started to eat at me.”

“I tried to fit in, but some of the toxic competitiveness just weren’t me. I felt like I was playing a part that didn’t align with who I was.”

“I felt like I was in the right place on my crew, but anybody outside of that, I fell out of place. If that makes sense.”

“I never felt like I was on the outside looking in. I definitely felt like there were times where I drank the Kool-Aid less than some...But I’ve never felt out of place.”

Sacrifices and Opportunity Costs. Many described weighing the loss of benefits, camaraderie, and sense of purpose against anticipated civilian gains.

“Number one, off the bat, stability, 100% the next 20, 25 years, I would have had a job for sure.”

“I would say the work was pretty fulfilling, I felt like I was, like, a somebody... getting out, it’s kind of like, boom, you have no worth. You’re just a person again... you’re no longer kind of special anymore. And that’s something that was kind of difficult when I left the military.”

“Some of the people I really miss, especially the friends that I made towards the end...stability. At the end of the day, yes, Army is somewhat unstable, but...in the Army, you’re still going to get paid...have a purpose. That, I sacrificed to get out.”

“I loved being a leader, but the cost was too high. Stress, anxiety, relationships falling apart—it all adds up, and the Army doesn’t fix any of it.”

Retention Programs and Policy Initiatives. Knowledge of Army retention incentives such as bonuses, location options or leadership position of choice was common, but effectiveness viewed as limited in the face of negative leadership or family hardship.

“They offered me command if I stayed, which was tempting. But I didn’t trust that it would actually work out when the time came.”

“I got a bonus offer, but that wasn’t going to fix our family constantly moving every two years. They threw money at me without addressing the real issue.”

“There was no bonuses or anything when I was leaving, they did say there were potential incentives on the National Guard and Reserve side, but active duty, I wasn’t told of any.”

“I had the meeting with the Colonel, asking why I’m leaving, but, no, because I think they knew my reason was rock solid.”

Post-Separation Experiences. Nearly all (16 of 17) officers reported relief and improved quality of life; however most also discussed difficulty in adjusting, missing camaraderie and meaning.

“It was weird being a civilian again. No more rank, no title, just a guy with a resume. That hits you hard after eight years in uniform.”

“I don’t miss the stress. I miss the people and the passion. But I sleep better. I eat dinner with my family. I smile more.”

“I felt lost for a few months after I got out. The Army was such a huge part of who I was. It doesn’t go away when you hang up the uniform.”

“I feel the same as the day I left—bittersweet... always look at my service as very fond memories, made an impact, accomplished a lot, close to a lot of people... but the challenges are real.”

The data revealed multiple factors influencing voluntary separation among junior Army officers, with both protracted consideration and distinct “shocks” catalyzing decisions. Dominant influences include leadership quality, family/personal demands, limited career agency, cultural fit, and perceived sacrifices. Retention incentives were viewed as supplementary rather than

decisive. The themes presented objectively detailed patterns and salient participant experiences related to each research question, forming the empirical foundation for subsequent evaluation, discussion, and implications.

Table 2

Themes and Level of Support from Participant Interview Data

Theme	Definition	**# of Participants out of 17)	Level of Support
Trigger Events / “Last Straw”	A pivotal incident or moment that catalyzed the separation decision (e.g., COVID mandates, leadership failure)	17/17	Universal Support
Multi-Stage Decision Making Process	Separation involved long-term consideration, evolving thoughts, and internal debate	15/17	Strong Support
Information Gathering and Consultation	Officers sought advice, researched options, and discussed decisions with others prior to separation	14/17	Strong Support
Competing Push and Pull Factors	Officers weighed dissatisfaction (“push”) against external opportunities or lifestyle improvements (“pull”)	15/17	Strong Support
Final Decision Point	Officers identified a decisive, concluding moment when their decision was finalized	16/17	Strong Support
Leadership and Command Climate	Experiences with toxic, micromanaging, or supportive leadership	16/17	Strong Support
Family and Personal Life Impact	Strain from deployments, relocations, and impact on relationships or family development	15/17	Strong Support
Career Progression and Perceived Agency	Perceived lack of control or growth in assignments, promotions, and development	14/17	Strong Support
Fit / Misfit with Army Culture and Values	Degree to which participants felt aligned or alienated by military culture and identity	13/17	Moderate Support
Perceived Sacrifices and Opportunity Costs	Emotional, relational, or lifestyle costs that outweighed benefits of continued service	14/17	Strong Support
Post-Separation Reflections	Emotional, psychological, and occupational adjustment after leaving—relief, identity loss, etc.	16/17	Strong Support
Retention Programs and Policy Initiatives	Perceptions of the relevance, effectiveness, or failures of formal Army retention programs	12/17	Moderate Support

Evaluation of the Findings

RQ1 How do former Junior Officers describe their decision-making processes that led to their separation from the U.S. Army?

Results are consistent with the Unfolding Model of Voluntary Turnover (Lee & Mitchell, 1996), which posits that employees follow decision paths influenced by either “shocks” or gradual dissatisfaction. Most participants described multi-stage decision-making processes, with frequent references to acute shocks, aligned with the model’s “shock-induced paths.” However, for most participants, these shocks acted on top of an ongoing cumulative dissatisfaction, characteristic of the model’s “deliberate decision path.” Participants described engaging in information gathering and consultation before taking formal action. This preparation parallels the model’s assumption that individuals making voluntary transitions often weigh contextual and personal factors before finalizing their decisions.

The development of distinct stages (early dissatisfaction, consideration, a triggering event, and formal decision) suggests that turnover among Army Junior Officers is rarely impulsive. Consistent with literature reviewed in Chapter 2, many Officers underwent a re-evaluation of identity and long-term life goals, reinforcing the notion that personal meaning is deeply embedded in the separation process. This decision path is described in Figure 1, which shows that Junior Officers typically follow a path of gradual dissatisfaction marked by triggering events that begin the push towards separation. Followed by information gathering from family members and mentors, which then enables the assessment of push and pull factors which leads to the final decision to separate. Additionally, at any point the decision-making process can be accelerated by shock events rapidly pushing Officers towards the separation decision.

Figure 1: Observed Decision Path

RQ2: What personal and organizational experiences do former Junior Officers identify as most significant in their decision to voluntarily separate from the U.S. Army?

Participants most frequently described “Poor Leadership” and “Command Climate” as the most significant factor in their decision to separate. Nearly all participants referenced negative experiences with leadership as significant factors that motivated their separation decision. Following this the factors of family and personal life impact, perceived lack of career agency, and perceived loss of opportunity strongly contributing to the participants separation decision.

The participants’ narratives supported all three dimensions of Job Embeddedness Theory (JET; Mitchell et al., 2001). Starting with links, several participants expressed that professional relationships had once been anchors, but as leadership changed and peers began to exit service, those links weakened. In terms of fit, many participants initially reported strong alignment with Army values, but over time experienced growing dissonance. Misfit was especially prominent among those who encountered institutional rigidity, cultural fatigue, or ethical inconsistency. Then in terms of sacrifice, participants frequently referenced weighing what they were giving up. Common sacrifices were described as job security, benefits, pensions. These were weighed against what they had already sacrificed to start or maintain their Army career such as long-term relationships and time with their children. The tension between future gains and present costs resonates strongly with the “sacrifice” dimension of JET.

This research also supports earlier findings described by McMahon & Bernard (2019) and Wang et al. (2022) that Army service often becomes unsustainable due to family-military conflict, diminished work-life balance, and the increasing appeal of civilian opportunities.

Participants commonly noted push factors such as toxic leadership, mobility strain, rigid promotion systems, and pull factors being work-life balance, financial control, geographic stability, consistent with contemporary retention studies.

Lastly, perceptions of Army retention programs were mixed. While some participants acknowledged recent improvements such as the parental leave policy changes, most felt that bonuses and incentives did not address their primary reasons for leaving. This aligns with Gerstein (2022) and Spain et al. (2021), who found financial incentives to have limited power when offset by diminished personal and professional satisfaction. This evaluation shows that the findings fit cohesively within the conceptual framework outlined in Chapters 1 and 2 and build upon existing military-specific retention research. While each participant's story was unique, thematic convergence across interviews supports the relevance and utility of both the Unfolding Model and Job Embeddedness Theory in explaining turnover among Junior Officers in the U.S. Army.

Summary

This chapter has detailed the complex, multi-layered factors driving voluntary separation among Junior Officers in the U.S. Army, highlighting the interplay between critical "trigger" events and ongoing contextual influences that shape decision-making. The findings align with existing theoretical frameworks, illustrating how leadership climate, family considerations, career advancement opportunities, and cultural fit contribute to retention outcomes.

These findings provide a crucial empirical foundation for the discussion to follow. Chapter 5 will interpret these results using the theoretical frameworks and existing literature, to explore their practical implications for Army retention strategies, and offer targeted

recommendations for policy and leadership practice improvements. The next chapter also identifies opportunities for future research to build upon the insights gained from this study.

Chapter 5: Implications, Recommendations, and Conclusions

Chapter 5 builds upon the study's findings to interpret their significance, discuss their contribution to existing scholarship, and identify practical implications for Army leadership and policy. The study addressed the pressing problem that there is a low retention of Junior Officers in the U.S. Army, a trend that poses long term risks to force readiness and continuity of leadership. Recent data indicate that many Junior Officers choose to separate from service shortly after completing their initial obligation or within eight years, creating a leadership gap that undermines staffing requirements and operational effectiveness (Department of the Army, 2021; Department of Defense, 2021). These trends are not only a challenge for the Army but also a matter of national security, as decreases in officer retention directly erode the Army's ability to maintain a fully prepared and capable force (Jamison, 2023 & Jamison, 2024).

In response to this problem, the purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to explore the experiences and decision-making processes of former Junior Officers in the United States Army that led to their voluntary separation from service, providing a deeper understanding of the factors that influenced their decisions. By capturing how these officers described their separation process and identifying the personal and organizational experiences they viewed as most decisive, the study contributes new insight into the broader phenomenon of officer attrition. The study employed a qualitative case study design rooted in Job Embeddedness Theory (Mitchell et al., 2001) and the Unfolding Model of Voluntary Turnover (Lee & Mitchell, 1996), the methodology serves primarily as a vehicle to distill themes from participants' lived experiences that shed light on why retention efforts have struggled to succeed.

The contributions of this research lie in extending both theoretical and practical knowledge about military human capital retention. The findings not only address the research

questions directly but also provide a nuanced understanding of how structural, organizational, and personal factors interact in shaping officers' choices to stay or leave service. These interpretations inform the development of more effective retention policies and advance scholarly discussion on voluntary turnover in military contexts. Ultimately, the study's insights underscore the urgency of aligning Army leadership, policy, and culture with the evolving needs of Junior Officers, offering guidance for decision makers seeking to strengthen officer development, enhance institutional trust, and improve long-term retention outcomes.

Summary of the Results

The analysis revealed 12 key themes. Participants consistently described separation as a multi-stage decision-making process, shaped by both cumulative dissatisfaction and specific triggering events. The most influential organizational factors included leadership climate, lack of career agency, and work-life imbalance, while personal factors included spousal career limitations, family disruption due to relocations, and loss of cultural fit. Many participants emphasized that current Army retention programs, especially financial bonuses, do not address these root causes. While there are some acknowledged improvements in policy, such as parental leave and expanded assignment options, the consensus was that systemic and leadership-based improvements are still needed.

Limitations

This study's findings must be interpreted while considering several important limitations that shape both the strength and the generalizability of its conclusions. First, the reliance on a purposeful sampling of recently separated Junior Officers introduces the possibility of selection bias, as those who volunteered to participate may have had particularly salient or atypical experiences compared to the broader cohort of Junior Officers who leave the Army. Although

deliberate efforts were made to recruit participants from diverse functional branches, ranks, and backgrounds, the sample may underrepresent career fields with highly specialized technical roles or those from units experiencing unique retention pressures. The perspectives of officers from combat support branches or underrepresented demographic groups, may not be fully captured by this research.

Additionally, this qualitative study's dependence on retrospective, self-reported data introduces limitations related to participant recall and hindsight bias, especially given the time elapsed since separation and the influence of post military experiences on participant reflection. The inherent subjectivity of semi-structured interviews further means that responses are interpreted through both participant and researcher lenses, and the analysis is vulnerable to unintentional researcher bias despite reflexive practices undertaken throughout data collection and coding. As the primary researcher is a current Army officer, personal experiences and assumptions may have subtly influenced the framing or interpretation of findings, though mitigating efforts were employed to enhance transparency and objectivity. Also, this study's modest sample size limits the statistical generalizability of results to the larger population of Army Junior Officers or other military branches and services.

Another constraint is the contextual boundary of the study, focusing on Junior Officers who separated within the last three years, a period marked by distinctive operational, economic, and policy conditions such as COVID-19, the Afghanistan pull out or related disruptions and shifting Army retention initiatives. These influences may not reflect longer-term trends or broader policy environments, thus confining the applicability of the findings to this specific time frame. Finally, the study's design excludes corroborative data from supervisors, organizations, or administrative records, resulting in findings that reflect the perspectives and interpretations of

participants alone. Although these limitations do not diminish the value of the insights generated, they necessitate caution in applying the findings to policy and practice and highlight the importance of future research using complementary methods and expanded representative samples to strengthen transferability and theoretical robustness.

Implications

RQ 1: How do Former Junior Officers Describe Their Decision-Making Processes that led to Their Separation from the U.S. Army?

The study findings reveal that Junior Officers' decisions to separate commonly follow a multi-stage decision-making process involving extended deliberation, information gathering, consulting trusted individuals, and ultimately reaching a definitive turning point or "last straw." This process is consistent with the Unfolding Model of Voluntary Turnover (Lee & Mitchell, 1996), which highlights that turnover often results not from impulse but from either shocks or cumulative dissatisfaction over time.

This demonstrated use of a multi-stage decision process supports prior research indicating that military personnel typically deliberate their exit decisions extensively due to the unique sacrifices involved, such as family disruption and loss of career identity (Holtom & Inderrieden, 2006; Nordmo et al., 2023). The role of consultations with spouses and mentors underscores the importance of social embeddedness in decision-making, extending JET's concept of "links" to informal support networks beyond the Army structure (Mitchell et al, 2001). Separately, a factor influencing interpretation is the reliance on participants' retrospective accounts, which may introduce recall bias toward emphasizing identifiable trigger events over more gradual dissatisfaction. However, the coherence across diverse interviews strengthens confidence in the multi-stage model's applicability to Junior Officers' retention decisions.

RQ 2: What personal and organizational experiences do former Junior Officers identify as most significant in their decision to voluntarily separate from the U.S. Army?

The most significant personal and organizational experiences shaping Junior Officers' voluntary separation decisions demonstrate complex interaction between individual priorities and institutional realities, as illuminated by both the study's findings and broader scholarly literature. Central among these are negative leadership experiences, persistent conflicts between military service and family needs, and a perceived lack of alignment with Army culture and values. Consistent with JET, the "links" component, encompassing relationships with leaders and peers, proved pivotal with toxic or unsupportive leadership frequently cited as a decisive factor triggering departure. This corroborates assessments by Cialdini et al. (2021) and Gerstein (2022) that leadership has an outsize impact on officer retention.

Equally pronounced were personal factors, notably the consequences of frequent relocations and the challenges these impose on family stability, echoing McMahon and Bernard's (2019) identification of spouse and family support as major determinants of retention. The "fit" dimension of JET, representing the alignment between officers' values, career aspirations, and Army life, surfaced when participants described misalignment with institutional culture or limited meaningful career progression. "Sacrifice" within JET was evident as officers weighed potential benefits and intrinsic rewards against enduring costs to personal goals and well-being.

Significantly, and in contrast to literature suggesting financial incentives are paramount (Department of Defense, 2023), most participants regarded such incentives as inadequate unless accompanied by tangible improvements in organizational environment and support. This points

to an evolving set of expectations among contemporary officers, prioritizing fulfillment, agency, and holistic wellbeing over compensation alone. The gap between the intent of monetary retention programs and officers' lived realities suggests policy solutions focused solely on bonuses risk missing deeper, structural drivers of attrition. The implications are clear, effective retention requires comprehensive changes, including leadership development, increased career autonomy, and support systems for families, aligning with current calls in retention research for multi-faceted, experience-rooted strategies (Spain et al., 2021; Nordmo et al., 2023).

Ultimately, while leadership climate, family impact, and cultural fit consistently emerged as the most consequential factors, isolated effects such as technical career field constraints or job specific pressures were less influential for most, though they may merit attention in particular subpopulations. Thus, the findings reinforce the paramount importance of both personal and organizational context in shaping officer decisions and suggest policy efforts should be targeted and theoretically informed for maximum effect.

Contribution to the Study Problem and Literature

Together, these findings extend the existing retention literature by applying integrated frameworks tailored to Junior Officers' unique context, providing rich qualitative depth to previously quantitative-centric research (Department of the Army, 2021; Gerstein, 2022). The confirmation of the Unfolding Model and Job Embeddedness Theory within a military officer sample supports their theoretical robustness and adaptability, while participant narratives highlight areas where Army systems and policies fall short in meeting Officers' needs. The study contributes practical insights into how institutional factors such as leadership climate, and

assignment policies; and personal life realities combine in shaping turnover, suggesting that structural incentives insufficiently capture the complexity of officer retention dynamics.

Significant Implications and Societal Consequences

The consequences of persistently low Junior Officer retention are critical for national security, operational readiness, and fiscal stewardship of training investments. The study's emphasis on leadership and family suggests that focusing on stabilizing careers, enhancing leader accountability, and embedding family centric policies could substantially reduce attrition. Conversely, reliance predominantly on financial bonuses without addressing underlying organizational culture and personal hardship risks perpetuating turnover and associated costs. The Army's ability to maintain a skilled, experienced officer corps essential for mission success and force modernization hinges on embracing these insights. At a broader societal level, improving retention supports the well-being of military families and communities, preserving human capital trained at great public expense. Failure to act risks exacerbating leadership gaps that may degrade military effectiveness and morale, impacting service members and national interests.

Recommendations for Practice

The findings of this study suggest several implications for how the U.S. Army might approach the ongoing challenge of Junior Officer retention, offering ways that practice and theory can be more closely aligned to address officers' lived realities while contributing to the scholarly discourse on military personnel management.

One significant implication relates to officer promotion timelines. Many participants described feeling constrained by rigid, standardized promotion schedules that did not always reflect their demonstrated readiness or personal career aspirations. This perception of limited

agency is closely supported by Spain et al. (2021) and McMahon and Bernard (2019), who found that inflexible advancement systems may undermine retention by failing to accommodate individual differences in professional growth. In this context, the Army might benefit from exploring more flexible and merit-based approaches to promotion, such as pilot programs for decentralized, performance-based advancement, balancing the needs for organizational predictability with tailored career management. This shift could be expected to strengthen the “fit” and “control” dimensions described in JET (Mitchell et al., 2001), improving officer satisfaction as observed in participants' narratives. While further evaluation would be necessary to confirm the broader efficacy of such approaches, the consistency of these sentiments across the data and literature points to their potential relevance for current policy discussions.

Leadership climate also emerged as a recurring and decisive factor in officers' separation decisions. Numerous participants attributed turning points in their careers to the quality of their command and first-line leadership, echoing the importance of positive leader – subordinate relationships emphasized in Cialdini et al. (2021) and Nordmo et al. (2023). The study's results reinforce prior findings that traditional top-down evaluation systems may miss critical dimensions of leadership, and that organizations with robust feedback mechanisms tend to retain higher quality personnel (Spain et al., 2021; Carter et al., 2019). Integrating subordinate feedback into evaluation processes, at least in developmental pilot programs for junior leaders, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of leadership effectiveness, fostering the servant leadership and accountability identified as retention boosting in both this research and broader literature. Any such initiative should primarily serve developmental purposes to mitigate risk of misuse, as suggested by participants' concerns regarding retaliation and honest feedback. While

the impact of such feedback interventions on a wider scale is yet to be confirmed, their alignment with both theory and experience supports their cautious exploration.

Finally, the study underlines the limited impact of financial incentives when broader quality of life issues remains unmet. Consistent with perspectives from Switzer (2020), Wang et al. (2022), and participant accounts, bonuses were often viewed as insufficient to address root causes of dissatisfaction, such as family disruption and career misalignment. Instead, participants repeatedly expressed a preference for incentives that improve stability, family support, or career autonomy, an orientation echoed in recent scholarship advocating for holistic, non-monetary retention strategies (Department of the Army, 2023; Herrick & Chai, 2023; McMahon & Bernard, 2019). This supports the notion that policy innovations should prioritize assignment stability, expanded professional development opportunities, and a menu of personalized quality of life incentives. Such approaches connect directly to the “fit” and “links” components of JET, increasing embeddedness and sense of agency. However, caution is warranted: while non-monetary benefits may enhance retention for some, their impact will likely vary across subgroups, and further longitudinal evaluation is recommended to ensure resource investment is effectively targeted.

These recommendations reflect a merging of empirical findings, theoretical framing in JET and the Unfolding Model of Voluntary Turnover, and existing retention literature. They point toward nuanced, multi-dimensional retention strategies that may help address the distinct needs and motivations of contemporary Junior Officers. However, the context specific nature of the findings and the qualitative scope of the study must be well understood prior to making wide generalized decisions. Policymakers and practitioners should therefore consider these

implications as part of an iterative process of policy testing and refinement, informed by continued data collection and feedback from officers themselves

Recommendations for Future Research

Building on the conceptual frameworks, key findings, and implications of this study, several avenues exist for future researchers to further explore and enhance understanding of Junior Officer retention in the U.S. Army.

Expanding Sample Diversity and Longitudinal Designs

This study employed a qualitative retrospective case study with 17 participants who voluntarily separated within the past three years. While this sample provided rich, in-depth insights, future research should aim to include a larger, more diverse sample, incorporating Officers from a wider range of branches, career fields, geographic locations, and demographic backgrounds. Incorporating the perspectives of Officers who remained in service may also illuminate retention factors from the contrasting viewpoint. Longitudinal designs tracking Officers across career milestones would allow researchers to observe decision-making processes over time, reducing reliance on retrospective recall that may be subject to biases. Longitudinal studies could capture evolving perceptions of leadership, family impact, and organizational policies that relate to retention decisions.

Comparative and Quantitative Studies Supplementing Qualitative Findings

Future research could build upon this study's qualitative findings by designing quantitative survey instruments informed by the emergent themes and coding framework, enabling broader statistical validation and generalization. For example, measuring perceived

leadership quality, career agency, family support, and promotion transparency across larger Officer populations would clarify the relative magnitude of factors influencing retention.

Comparative studies between different military branches or between career fields that experience varying operational tempos could reveal contextual moderators or best practices unique to each environment. Such work would deepen understanding of whether themes uncovered here are held universally or are specific to certain cohorts.

Exploring the Impact and Implementation of Proposed Interventions

Given the recommendations arising from this study, such as merit-based promotion flexibility and subordinate feedback integration, future research should evaluate the feasibility, acceptance, and outcomes of such initiatives through pilot or experimental designs. Testing how decentralized promotion systems affect Officer satisfaction and career trajectories, or how subordinate input influences leadership development and retention, would provide imperative empirical evidence guiding policy.

Addressing Study Limitations: Reducing Bias and Enhancing Transferability

This study's limitations such as self-selection bias, potential recall bias, and underrepresentation of certain fields, point to improvement opportunities in future work. Employing random sampling or stratified recruitment can improve representativeness. Triangulating data sources by including supervisor perspectives, personnel records, and organizational data would enhance robustness. Additionally, multi-method approaches combining qualitative interviews with administrative data analytics might provide comprehensive insights.

The Next Logical Step in this Line of Research

Building upon qualitative evidence and the integrated Job Embeddedness and Unfolding Model framework, the next logical step is to conduct mixed-methods research combining longitudinal tracking with targeted experimental interventions. This approach would permit measurement of causal relationships between leader behaviors, family support policies, assignment practices, promotion flexibility, and retention outcomes. It would also enable testing of tailored retention programs responding to individual Officer needs illuminated in this study. Such research would not only refine theoretical understanding but directly inform more effective Army human capital strategies, ultimately contributing to national security through sustained leadership pipelines. These recommendations encourage future researchers to extend and deepen inquiry into Junior Officer retention by leveraging diversified methodologies, longitudinal perspectives, and implementation science approaches to build on the foundational insights provided here.

Conclusions

This study examined the decision-making processes and key experiences that led former United States Army Junior Officers to voluntarily separate from service. It addressed the persistent problem of low Junior Officer retention. A challenge that threatens the Army's leadership pipeline, operational readiness, and financial sustainability. Despite various policy reforms, Officers continue to depart at high rates, particularly upon completion of their initial service obligation.

Using a qualitative, exploratory case study design, this research captured the voices of seventeen former Officers, illuminating the complex interplay of organizational, personal, and cultural factors that influence voluntary separation decisions. The study was grounded in an

integrated conceptual framework that combined Job Embeddedness Theory and the Unfolding Model of Voluntary Turnover, enabling a nuanced understanding of how Officers become both anchored in and detached from military service. Participants described a multi-stage decision-making process shaped by gradual dissatisfaction and reinforced by one or more decisive triggering events. Often rooted in leadership issues, family strain, and a lack of career agency. These findings largely align with prior employee turnover research yet reveal unique aspects specific to the military context. Notably, rigid promotion timelines, limited personalization in career pathways, and ineffective retention initiatives emerged as organizational shortcomings in stark contrast to participants' needs and expectations.

The message of this study is clear: retention cannot be effectively addressed through financial incentives or one-size-fits-all initiatives alone. Instead, meaningful reform must emphasize flexibility, autonomy, leadership quality, and family support. Decentralizing promotion decisions, including subordinate feedback for developmental roles, and providing more personalized career and family stability options are essential first steps toward aligning Army systems with the realities of Junior Officers.

In doing so, the Army can improve retention not only through policy but through trust, by demonstrating that it listens to and acts on the real experiences of its people. Ultimately, this study contributes a grounded, practical perspective to the retention discourse and offers a path forward for increasing both officer satisfaction and organizational resilience in an era of evolving personnel demands.

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Appendix A Interview Guide

1. Introduction and Background

- Can you briefly describe your career in the Army, including your rank and years of service?
- What initially motivated you to join the Army as an officer?

2. Decision-Making Process

- Walk me through the process that led to your decision to leave the Army.
- Were there any specific "shock events" that made you seriously consider leaving?
- How long did you consider leaving before making your final decision?
- Were there any specific "shock events" that made you seriously consider leaving?

3. Significant Experiences

- What were the most rewarding aspects of your time as a Junior Officer?
- Can you describe any challenging experiences that influenced your decision to separate?
- How did your expectations of Army life compare to your actual experiences?

4. Organizational Factors

- How would you describe your relationship with your superiors and peers in the Army?
- How would you describe your sense of "fit" within the Army culture and values?

- What aspects of Army culture or policies had the most impact on your decision to leave?
- How did you perceive your career progression opportunities in the Army?
- What aspects of Army life would you consider a significant "sacrifice" if you left?

5. Personal Factors

- How did your Army career affect your personal life and relationships?
- What role did work-life balance play in your decision to separate?
- How did civilian job opportunities factor into your decision?
- How did your social and professional connections within the Army influence your decision to leave?
- How did your social and professional connections within the Army influence your decision to leave?

6. Retention Efforts

- Were you aware of any retention programs or incentives offered by the Army?
- If so, how did these influence your decision-making process?
- Were there any specific retention initiatives that made you reconsider your decision to leave, even briefly?
- What changes or initiatives do you think might have influenced you to stay in the Army?

7. Reflection

- Looking back, how do you feel about your decision to leave the Army?
- What advice would you give to current Junior Officers considering their career options?

8. Closing

- Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience or decision to leave the Army?

Appendix B Coding Guide

1. Job Embeddedness Factors

a. Links

- Professional relationships (superiors, peers)
- Personal relationships (family, friends)

b. Fit

- Alignment with Army values and culture
- Job satisfaction
- Career progression opportunities

c. Sacrifice

- Benefits and incentives
- Career stability
- Sense of purpose/service

2. Unfolding Model Components

a. Shock events

- Specific incidents triggering thoughts of leaving
- Unexpected challenges or disappointments

b. Image violations

- Misalignment between expectations and reality
- Conflicts with personal values or goals

c. Job satisfaction

- Positive experiences and rewards
- Negative experiences and challenges

- d. Job search and evaluation
 - Awareness of civilian opportunities
 - Comparison of military and civilian options
3. Decision-Making Process
 - a. Initial considerations
 - b. Information gathering
 - c. Weighing pros and cons
 - d. Final decision point
4. Significant Experiences
 - a. Positive experiences
 - Rewarding aspects of service
 - Personal growth opportunities
 - b. Negative experiences
 - Challenges and frustrations
 - Work-life balance issues
5. Organizational Factors
 - a. Leadership and management
 - b. Army policies and procedures
 - c. Organizational culture
 - d. Career development opportunities
6. Personal Factors
 - a. Family considerations
 - b. Work-life balance

- c. Personal goals and aspirations
 - d. Health and well-being
- 7. Retention Efforts
 - a. Awareness of programs
 - b. Effectiveness of initiatives
 - c. Suggested improvements
- 8. Reflections and Advice
 - a. Post-decision satisfaction
 - b. Lessons learned
 - c. Recommendations for current officers

Appendix C List of Military Social Networks for Participant Recruiting

1. NC State Veterans Alumni Network (Facebook group)
2. NC State Veterans Alumni Network (LinkedIn group)
3. NYU Veteran Alumni Network
4. Cornell Military Network
5. KU Veterans Alumni Network
6. The Mission Continues Alumni Network (Facebook group)
7. West Point Association of Graduates
8. Texas Tech Military and Veterans Alumni Network
9. UNCG Military and Veteran Alumni Network
10. Air Defense Artillery Association
11. United States Military Academy Alumni
12. Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) Facebook page
13. American Legion Facebook page
14. Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) Facebook page
15. Student Veterans of America Facebook page
16. Military Officers Association of America (MOAA) LinkedIn group
17. U.S. Army Alumni LinkedIn group
18. Veteran Mentor Network LinkedIn group
19. Service Academy Graduates LinkedIn group
20. Army University Alumni Association Facebook page
21. Reserve Officers Association (ROA) Facebook page
22. National Guard Association of the United States (NGAUS) Facebook page

23. Association of the United States Army (AUSA) LinkedIn group
24. U.S. Army Ranger Association Facebook page
25. Army Aviation Association of America (AAAA) Facebook page

Appendix D Consent Form



National University IRB
 9338 Lightwave Ave., San Diego, CA 92123
irb@nu.edu

My name is Daniel Curtin, and I am a doctoral student at National University (NU).

I'm asking you to take part in a research study about the low retention of Junior Officers in the United States Army, based on data from those who have chosen to leave military service. The name of this research is "Junior Officer Retention, A Qualitative Case Study of Former Junior Army Officer"

You may participate in this research if you meet all of the following criteria:

1. Are a former Junior Army Officer who separated at the rank of Second Lieutenant, First Lieutenant or Captain
2. Voluntarily separated from service within the last three years (after 2022).
3. Where not involuntarily separated for any reason, including medical separation.
4. Are age 18 or older

I hope to include 15 to 20 people in this research.

Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in the study.

What you will be asked to do: If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following activities:

1. Participate in a 1 on 1 online interview over Zoom for 60-90 minutes.
2. Provide perspective and experiences on your military service.
3. Review your interview transcript via email for 10-15 minutes to ensure data is correct.

During these activities, you will be asked questions about:

- Background information about your career in the Army.
- Your motivations to Join the Army and become an Officer.
- Your decision-making process that leads to your separation, including any specific contributing events and how long you considered separation before making your final decision.
- Your most rewarding aspects of your time as an Army Officer.
- Your challenging experiences that influenced your decision.
- Your expectation of the Army versus your actual experiences.
- Your relationship with your coworkers including peers and supervisors.
- How you fit within the Army culture and values.
- What aspects of Army life, culture, policies and career opportunities influenced your decision to leave.
- What aspects of Army life would you consider as a sacrifice you made to leave the Army.
- How the Army affected your personal and family life.
- How civilian job opportunities influenced your decision to sperate.
- The influence professional and social connections on your decision to sperate.
- The retention programs and incentives that were available to you.
- What changes or incentives would have affected your decision.

- Your current feelings about your decision to leave the Army.

Risks: Some possible risks include: Some of the questions and interview topics may trigger psychological stress by bringing up past traumatic experiences. To decrease the impact of these risks, you can skip any question you do not wish to answer, skip any activity, or stop participation at any time. Prior to the interview or at any time during the interview participants are encouraged to inform the researcher if there is a specific sensitive topic. These topics can be avoided by the researcher if requested.

Benefits: If you participate, there are no direct benefits to you. This research may increase the body of knowledge in the subject area of this research.

Recording: I would like to audio/video record your responses and actions with Zoom. during the interview. You can disable the video function of the online meeting platform at any time.

Mandated Reporting: My professional role outside of NU requires me to report suspicion of child or elderly abuse, suspicion of possible harm to self or others, and committed crimes to the appropriate authorities.

Confidentiality: I will keep the records of this study private and take reasonable measures to protect the security of all your personal information. In any report I make public, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Participants will be assigned pseudonyms, and any identifying information will be removed from transcripts and reports. Interview recordings and transcripts will be stored on a password-protected computer and encrypted cloud storage, accessible only to the researcher. All data will be securely stored for the duration required by IRB guidelines, after which it will be permanently deleted.

Taking part is voluntary: Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may quit at any time.

If you have questions: Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at d.curtin2229@o365.ncu.edu or at 570-854-1883

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) via email at irb@nu.edu

Statement of Consent: I have read the above information and have received answers to any questions I asked. I consent to take part in the study.

Your Signature _____ Date _____

Your Name (printed) _____

Appendix E Recruitment Letter



National University IRB
 9338 Lightwave Ave., San Diego, CA 92123
irb@nu.edu

My name is Daniel Curtin, and I am a doctoral student at National University. I am conducting a research study to understand the low retention of Junior Officers in the United States Army.

I am recruiting individuals who meet all of these criteria:

1. Are a former Junior Army Officer who separated at the rank of Second Lieutenant, First Lieutenant or Captain
2. Voluntarily separated from service within the last three years (after 2022).
3. Where not involuntarily separated for any reason, including medical separation.
4. Are age 18 or older

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following activities:

1. Participate in a 1 on 1 online interview over Zoom for 60-90 minutes.
2. Provide perspective and experiences on your military service.
3. Review your interview transcript via email for 10-15 minutes to ensure data is correct.

During these activities, you will be asked questions about:

- Background information about your career in the Army.
- Your motivations to Join the Army and become an Officer.
- Your decision-making process that leads to your separation, including any specific contributing events and how long you considered separation before making your final decision.
- Your most rewarding aspects of your time as an Army Officer.
- Your challenging experiences that influenced your decision.
- Your expectation of the Army versus your actual experiences.
- Your relationship with your coworkers including peers and supervisors.
- How you fit within the Army culture and values.
- What aspects of Army life, culture, policies and career opportunities influenced your decision to leave.
- What aspects of Army life would you consider as a sacrifice you made to leave the Army.
- How the Army affected your personal and family life.
- How civilian job opportunities influenced your decision to sperate.
- The influence professional and social connections on your decision to sperate.
- The retention programs and incentives that were available to you.
- What changes or incentives would have affected your decision.
- Your current feelings about your decision to leave the Army.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me at d.curtin2229@o365.ncu.edu or at 570-854-1883. Thank you for considering participating in this voluntary research!

Daniel Curtin

Appendix F Final Codebook

Theme #	Node Name	Definition / Scope	Core Inclusion Criteria & Examples	Coding Tips / Subcodes
1	Trigger Events / "Last Straw"	Pivotal incident, notification, or realization precipitating the decision to leave.	Sudden deployment orders; critical leadership or policy moments; personal/family crises coinciding with Army stress.	Code single events and strong "aha" moments.
2	Multi-Stage Decision Making Process	The decision to leave as a cumulative, evolving, or periodically revisited process.	Yearly reassessment; gradual dissatisfaction; oscillation; ongoing career self-inventory.	Capture both explicit and implicit processual thinking.
3	Information Gathering & Consultation	Efforts to obtain career information, seek advice, or consult networks.	Conversations with mentors, peers, transition seminars, online research; talking to former officers.	Include family input, transition resources.
4	Competing Push and Pull Factors	Explicit weighing of negative ("push") and positive ("pull") forces.	Comparing dissatisfaction/burnout vs. appeal of civilian goals, family, location, autonomy, etc.	Subcode as Push Factors & Pull Factors for analytic depth.
5	Final Decision Point	Explicit moment/statement of irrevocable exit commitment.	"After this, my mind was made up"; submission of separation paperwork; "point of no return".	Anchor to articulated "final straw" or clear cut-off.
6	Leadership and Command Climate	The influence of leaders and command environment—positive and negative—on satisfaction and retention.	Stories of toxic or supportive leaders; mentorship or perceived injustice; talent/assignment management.	Subcode for toxic vs supportive if pattern emerges.
7	Family and Personal Life Impact	How Army career impacts family relationships, work-life balance, and personal wellbeing.	Missed life events; deployment strain; difficulty starting/raising family; spouse/partner considerations.	Include mental health and stress spillover.
8	Career Progression & Perceived Agency	Perception of control, growth, flexibility, and "fairness" in Army career path.	Denied transfers, promotion bottlenecks, rigid career timelines, inability to specialize/master.	Code denied opportunities; perceived bureaucracy.
9	Fit / Misfit with Army Culture and Values	The degree of cultural identification/alienation with Army norms and values.	Expressions of pride, discomfort, misalignment, or strong identity with military values.	Capture nuanced/partial fits or changes over time.
10	Perceived Sacrifices & Opportunity Costs	Personal, relational, and professional costs of either staying or leaving—often framed as trade-offs or regrets.	Lost time with family; missed civilian careers/education; "catching up" with peers; forfeited benefits.	Include both anticipated and realized sacrifices.
11	Post-Separation Reflections	Emotional, occupational, and identity adjustment post-military.	"No regrets," identity loss, civilian transition stories, surprise benefits/drawbacks of leaving.	Note both immediate and long-term reflections.
12	Retention Programs & Policy Initiatives	Reactions to, experience with, or views on Army retention efforts, incentives, or reform proposals.	Continuation pay, bonus programs, career track ideas; critiques of program effectiveness.	Code both actual and hypothetical/potential initiatives.