



September 2023

MILITARY BARRACKS

Poor Living
Conditions Undermine
Quality of Life and
Readiness

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-105797](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

DOD houses hundreds of thousands of service members in military barracks. Reports of poor conditions have raised questions about DOD's management of barracks.

The Joint Explanatory Statement and Senate Report 117-39, accompanying bills for the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022, included provisions for GAO to review DOD's efforts to maintain and improve military barracks. This report examines, among other things, the extent to which DOD has (1) reliably assessed barracks conditions, (2) made informed decisions on barracks funding, and (3) conducted oversight to improve barracks.

GAO analyzed DOD policies, budgets, and other documentation; interviewed DOD housing officials; toured barracks at a non-generalizable sample of 10 installations; and met with installation officials and barracks residents.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making 31 recommendations for DOD, including the military departments, to, among other things, provide guidance on barracks condition assessments, obtain complete funding information, and increase oversight of barracks programs. DOD concurred with 23 of the recommendations and partially concurred with 8, in some cases noting ongoing actions that would address them. GAO continues to believe DOD should fully implement all of these recommendations.

View [GAO-23-105797](#). For more information, contact Elizabeth A. Field at (202) 512-2775 or FieldE1@gao.gov.

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Poor Living Conditions Undermine Quality of Life and Readiness

What GAO Found

Service members reported to GAO that the conditions of barracks affect their quality of life and readiness. However, GAO found weaknesses in the Department of Defense's (DOD) efforts to maintain and improve their conditions. For example,

- **DOD does not reliably assess conditions, and some barracks are substandard.** DOD assessments of conditions are unreliable. GAO observed barracks that pose potentially serious health and safety risks—such as broken windows and inoperable fire systems—and that do not meet minimum DOD standards for privacy and configuration. Thousands of service members live in barracks below standards, according to officials.

Examples of Poor Barracks Conditions at Military Installations GAO Visited



Source: Department of Defense (left and right); GAO (middle). | GAO-23-105797

- **DOD does not have complete funding information to make informed decisions.** For example, DOD requested about \$15 billion for overall facility sustainment for fiscal year 2024 but could not identify how much of this total would be spent toward barracks. In addition, DOD did not know how much it spent on housing allowances for service members who would normally be required to live in barracks, but did not because of insufficient space or poor living conditions. Complete funding information would help DOD target improvements and provide the department with more visibility into full costs.
- **DOD conducts insufficient oversight.** For example, DOD does not track information on the condition of barracks or facilitate collaboration on initiatives to improve barracks. Insufficient oversight hampers DOD's ability to identify and address long-standing challenges in barracks conditions across the department.

By developing or clarifying guidance related to these weaknesses, DOD could better prioritize investments in barracks to improve living conditions for service members and help ensure that barracks housing programs across military services are consistently implemented and support quality of life and readiness.

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Abbreviations

BAH	Basic Allowance for Housing
DOD	Department of Defense
FSRM	Facility Sustainment, Restoration and Modernization
MILCON	Military Construction
O&M	Operation and Maintenance
OMB	Office of Management and Budget
OSD	Office of the Secretary of Defense

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September 19, 2023

The Honorable Jack Reed
Chairman
The Honorable Roger Wicker
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate

The Honorable Mike Rogers
Chairman
The Honorable Adam Smith
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
House of Representatives

Military barracks house hundreds of thousands of service members on U.S. military installations globally, and living conditions in these facilities can have significant effects on barracks residents' quality of life and readiness. While housing varies by rank, location, and family situation, all enlisted service members start their military careers living in barracks. After initial training, each military service generally requires junior-enlisted service members without dependents (e.g., a spouse or child) to live in barracks located on military installations.¹ The military services manage nearly 9,000 barracks facilities worldwide, and almost all barracks are government-owned, operated, and maintained. In managing barracks, the military services face a number of challenges, including aging infrastructure and competition with other mission-essential facilities for maintenance and construction funding. In recent years, there have been reports of barracks being abruptly closed after detection of problems like mold, pests, and broken air conditioning. Such reports have raised questions about the Department of Defense's (DOD) management and oversight of barracks.

¹The Department of Defense (DOD) uses the term unaccompanied housing for facilities commonly called barracks. The Army and Navy refer to unaccompanied housing as barracks; the Department of the Air Force refers to these facilities as dormitories. The Marine Corps uses the terms barracks and bachelor enlisted quarters. For the purposes of this report, we use the term barracks to refer to unaccompanied housing across military services. Additionally, we limited the scope of this review to barracks that house junior-enlisted service members.

We have previously reported on long-standing concerns regarding challenges with persistent military housing conditions, deferred facility maintenance, and aging infrastructure. We last reported on challenges with barracks conditions in 2002 and 2003, including that most training barracks used for initial military training were in need of significant repair, often lacking adequate heating and air conditioning, and having improper ventilation and plumbing-related deficiencies.²

In January 2022, we reported that for many years, DOD has not fully funded its facility sustainment requirements, resulting in a backlog of at least \$137 billion in deferred maintenance costs, as of fiscal year 2020—a significant and growing risk to the department’s ability to support its missions. We also reported that because facility sustainment funding is focused primarily on mission-critical facilities, lower-priority facilities—such as barracks—are chronically neglected and experience increased deterioration.³

The Joint Explanatory Statement and Senate Armed Services Committee report accompanying bills for the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022 included provisions for us to evaluate the condition of the barracks operated and maintained by each of the military services.⁴ This report examines the extent to which (1) DOD has reliably assessed barracks conditions, (2) DOD has assessed the effects of barracks conditions on quality of life and readiness, (3) DOD has tracked funding related to barracks housing programs and made informed decisions on funding for and related to barracks, (4) the military services have reevaluated policies related to barracks housing programs, and (5) the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) has conducted oversight of

²GAO, *Defense Infrastructure: Most Recruit Training Barracks Have Significant Deficiencies*, [GAO-02-786](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 13, 2002) and *Military Housing: Opportunities That Should Be Explored to Improve Housing and Reduce Costs for Unmarried Junior Servicemembers*, [GAO-03-602](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 10, 2003.)

³GAO, *Defense Infrastructure: DOD Should Better Manage Risks Posed by Deferred Facility Maintenance*, [GAO-22-104481](#) (Washington, D.C.: January 31, 2022).

⁴S. Rep. No. 117-39, at 338-339 (2021); Joint Explanatory Statement to accompany the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022, 167 Cong. Rec. H7355 (daily ed. Dec. 7, 2021). The military services included in our review are the Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps. As of June 2023, Space Force barracks are managed in accordance with Air Force policies, according to officials. As such, we do not report separately on the Space Force.

military service housing programs for barracks and facilitated collaboration across the military services' barracks programs.

To address these objectives, we reviewed relevant DOD and military service policies, guidance, and other documents related to barracks housing programs, and interviewed OSD and military service officials. We also visited a non-generalizable sample of 10 installations—selected to represent each of the military services—where we observed barracks conditions and layout.⁵ In addition, we facilitated 12 discussion groups with barracks residents at the 10 installations we visited.⁶ To assess barracks funding, we reviewed DOD budget materials and budget data.

We also examined DOD survey data on service member satisfaction with housing, including barracks, from 2019, 2021, and 2022 and data on housing allowances from fiscal years 2018 through 2022. To assess data reliability related to housing allowances, we met with knowledgeable DOD officials and reviewed relevant documentation, in addition to other reliability assessments. We found the data reliable for the purposes of reporting on costs to DOD related to housing allowances for service members typically required to live in barracks. See appendix I for a detailed description of our scope and methodology.

We conducted this performance audit from February 2022 to September 2023 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

⁵The 10 installations in our non-generalizable sample included two Army installations (Fort George G. Meade, Maryland and Fort Carson, Colorado), two Air Force installations (Joint Base Andrews-Naval Air Facility Washington, Maryland and Joint Base San Antonio, Texas), three Navy installations (Naval Support Activity Bethesda, Maryland; Naval Base Coronado, California; and Naval Base San Diego, California), and three Marine Corps installations (Marine Corps Base Quantico, Virginia; Marine Corps Recruit Depot, San Diego, California, and Camp Pendleton, California).

⁶In order to obtain resident perspectives on the conditions of barracks at the 10 installations we visited, we facilitated 12 focus groups ranging in size from four to 20 service members. Ten discussion groups included service members living in government-owned barracks, one discussion group included service members living in privatized barracks, and one discussion group included service members who would typically be required to live in barracks, but who instead received housing allowances and rented apartments outside the installation.

Background

Barracks Residents

The military services generally require enlisted service members in certain ranks who are unaccompanied—meaning without dependents—to live in barracks on military installations. These requirements vary by service. See table 1.

Table 1: Unaccompanied Enlisted Service Members Required to Live in Barracks, by Military Service and Rank

Military Service	Service Member Ranks Required to Live in Barracks
Army	E-1 (Private) through E-5 (Sergeant) ^a
Air Force ^b	E-1 (Airman Basic) through E-3 (Airman First Class), and E-4 (Senior Airman) with fewer than 3 years of service
Navy	E-1 (Seaman Recruit) through E-3 (Seaman), and E-4 (Petty Officer Third Class) with fewer than 4 years of service ^c
Marine Corps	E-1 (Private) through E-5 (Sergeant)

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense documentation. | GAO-23-105797

^aOutside of the United States, the Army requires service members E-1 (private) through E-6 (staff sergeant) to live in barracks.

^bAs of June 2023, Department of the Air Force policy, including establishment of ranks required to live in barracks, applies both to Air Force and Space Force barracks and service members, according to officials. As such, we do not report separately on requirements related to Space Force barracks.

^cDepending on availability of barracks housing on Navy installations, E-4s with more than 4 years of service may also be required to live in barracks.

Roles and Responsibilities for Barracks Housing Programs

OSD and each of the military services have roles and responsibilities to oversee barracks housing programs. Specifically, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020 directed the Secretary of Defense to establish a Chief Housing Officer, and the James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 clarified that this position is to be held by the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Energy, Installations, and Environment.⁷ The Chief Housing Officer is responsible for the oversight of all housing, including barracks housing, and the creation and standardization of housing policies and processes.⁸ Additional OSD offices also have responsibilities related to oversight of barracks facilities, quality-of-life effects related to housing, and barracks funding. These include:

⁷Pub. L. No. 116-92, §3012 (2019) and Pub. L. No. 117-263, § 2807 (*codified* at 10 U.S.C. § 2851a(a)).

⁸10 U.S.C. § 2851a.

-
- The Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment, who is responsible for overall policy making and oversight responsibility of DOD real property, including barracks, and for establishing overarching guidance and procedures for managing and disposing of real property;⁹
 - The Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness (Personnel and Readiness), who is responsible for overseeing the determination of housing allowances and for monitoring morale and welfare aspects of housing programs; and
 - The Under Secretary of Defense, Comptroller, who is responsible for providing guidance and procedures on financing, budgeting, and accounting for DOD housing programs.

Military Service Roles and Responsibilities. The military services are responsible for managing their respective barracks housing programs, including establishing criteria to determine which service members are required to live in barracks, and establishing standards for their barracks. The services delegate to installation commanders broad authority, responsibility, and accountability for providing barracks housing, and are responsible for providing oversight of installation commanders' managements of barracks. See figure 1.

⁹The same office is responsible for exercising general oversight over DOD's military construction program.

Figure 1: Military Service and Installation Roles and Responsibilities for Barracks Housing

Army	Assistant Secretary of the Army for Installations, Energy and Environment	Establishes policy, oversees programs, and sets the strategic direction for installations, housing, and partnerships.
	Deputy Chief of Staff, G-9	Serves as the lead integrator for installation matters across the Army. Advises the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Installations, Energy and Environment on facilities investment requirements and strategy and on Army-owned and privatized family and unaccompanied housing, including barracks.
	Army Installation Management Command	A major subordinate command within Army Materiel Command, Army Installation Management Command handles the day-to-day operations of U.S. Army installations around the globe.
Marine Corps	Deputy Commandant of the Marine Corps for Installations and Logistics	Serves as the single point of contact for the Commandant and Assistant Commandant for all matters pertaining to installations and logistics functions, including installations management.
	Commander, Marine Corps Installations Command	Provides management oversight of Marine Corps housing and portfolio management of privatized housing.
Navy	Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Installations, Energy and Facilities	Establishes policies and procedures, and oversees all functions and programs related to acquiring, utilizing, managing, and disposing of Navy real property.
	Commander, Navy Installations Command	Provides management, control, and performance oversight of housing programs as the Echelon II command under the Chief of Navy Operations.
	Naval Facilities Engineering Systems Command	Serves as the Navy Systems Command and technical authority for facilities engineering and management, real estate, and construction. Responsible for the acquisition, construction, operations and maintenance (O&M), and when no longer needed, disposal of the Navy's shore infrastructure, such as barracks.
Air Force	Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Installations	Serves as the authority for all matters relating to the management of Air Force housing, including barracks.
	Deputy Chief of Staff, Logistics, Installations and Force Protection, Director of Civil Engineers	Develops housing policy and standards, provides implementing guidance, develops unaccompanied housing design standards, determines housing requirements, establishes investment strategies, advocates for resources, and directs the Air Force housing program.
	Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Environment, Safety and Infrastructure	Programs and budgets for barracks military construction (MILCON) projects, among others.
	Air Force Installation Mission Support Center	Advocates for resources for Air Force real property accountability and reporting, acquisition, and divestiture activities.
	Air Force Civil Engineering Center, Installations Directorate	Maintains responsibility for all Air Force real property acquisition, management, and disposal, including barracks.
Installations	Installation Commander	Ensures all service members have access to suitable military housing and services; manages, operates, and maintains DOD-owned housing units; and provides oversight of privatized housing.
	Installation Housing	Oversees management, utilization, and operation of barracks housing, including ensuring compliance with housing standards, managing furnishings, and monitoring occupancy.
	Unit Commanders and other unit personnel	Ensure good order and discipline in the barracks; may also conduct health and welfare checks of residents.

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) documentation. | GAO-23-105797

Types of Barracks

Government-owned barracks. The military services manage and maintain multiple types of government-owned barracks. The configuration of these barracks varies depending on their use. The primary types of barracks are:

- **Permanent party barracks**, which house service members for longer periods of time, such as during assignment to permanent duty stations; and

- **Training barracks**, which house service members for shorter periods during basic training, as well as subsequent required training.

Permanent party barracks configurations generally provide more privacy and amenities than training barracks. See figure 2.

Figure 2: Examples of Permanent Party and Training Barracks

Permanent party barracks



Training barracks



Source: GAO. | GAO-23-105797

Privatized barracks. In the mid-1990s, DOD became concerned that inadequate housing was contributing to service members' decisions to leave the military. As part of an effort to improve the quality of military housing, Congress enacted the Military Housing Privatization Initiative in 1996. The initiative provided DOD with authority to obtain private-sector financing and management to repair, renovate, construct, and operate military housing. Since then, the private sector has assumed primary responsibility for approximately 99 percent of military family housing in the U.S. The initiative also allowed for the military services to privatize housing for unaccompanied service members. Currently, the Army and Navy have seven privatized barracks projects.¹⁰

- The Army developed five privatized barracks projects, with four intended to house unaccompanied service members in ranks E-6 and

¹⁰The Navy has two privatized projects at Naval Station Norfolk, Virginia and Naval Station San Diego, California, and the Army has five privatized projects at Fort Drum, New York, Fort Stewart, Georgia, Fort Irwin, California, Fort Liberty, North Carolina, and Fort Meade, Maryland.

above, and one intended to house unaccompanied service members in ranks E-5 and below.¹¹

- In 2002, Congress provided the Navy with the authority to carry out not more than three pilot projects using the private sector for the acquisition or construction of housing for unaccompanied personnel. As a result, the Navy developed two privatized barracks projects generally designed to house unaccompanied service members in ranks E-4 and below, including service members who would otherwise be housed in government-owned barracks or on ships in port.¹²

Barracks Funding

Military barracks, like other DOD facilities, often require significant investment to plan, construct, improve, and maintain. As facility construction and improvements can take years to plan and may require significant funding, a military service's decision to invest often takes place well in advance of the actual investment or realization of the investment. The military services manage planning and funding decisions through the Planning, Programming, Budgeting, and Execution process, which determines how DOD and its components will allocate resources to provide capabilities necessary to accomplish the department's missions.¹³ The President's budget request describes government-wide funding for high-level purposes; DOD and each component submit additional budget documentation to Congress providing a detailed presentation of the proposed budget at the program, project, or activity level.

Three appropriation titles provide funding related to housing the military services' population of unaccompanied junior-enlisted service members:

¹¹The initial development cost for the Army privatized barracks projects was about \$219 million, all of which was incurred by the privatized housing companies. The development costs generally included the costs of construction and project financing. The Army's investment in the projects was in the form of land leased to the privatized housing companies to serve as the sites for the projects.

¹²According to officials, the Navy considered a third pilot project in Jacksonville, Florida, but determined this location was not cost effective and did not pursue the project.

¹³The Planning, Programming, Budgeting and Execution process serves as the annual resource allocation process for DOD within a quadrennial planning cycle. Programs and budgets are formulated annually. DOD Directive (DODD) 7045.14, *The Planning, Programming, Budgeting, and Execution (PPBE) Process* (Jan. 25, 2013) (incorporating Change 1, Aug. 29, 2017). See also, DOD 7000.14-R, *Financial Management Regulation* (2023).

(1) Operation and Maintenance (O&M), (2) Military Construction (MILCON), and (3) Military Personnel.¹⁴

- O&M appropriations fund sustainment, restoration, and modernization of DOD facilities, including barracks housing.¹⁵ Sustainment is the regular maintenance and repair activities necessary to keep facilities in good working order. Restoration means restoring a facility to such a condition that it may be used for its designated purpose, such as repair and replacement work on a facility damaged by fire, excessive age, or natural disaster. Modernization is the alteration or replacement of facilities solely to implement new or higher standards, accommodate new functions, or replace building components that typically last more than 50 years, such as the framework or foundation.
- The MILCON appropriation is used to fund construction, development, conversion or extension of any kind carried out with respect to a military installation. Examples of MILCON construction are the installation or assembly of a new facility such as a barracks; the addition, expansion, extension, alteration, conversion, or replacement of an existing facility, including barracks; or relocation of such a facility from one installation to another.
- The Military Personnel appropriation funds housing allowances, including the basic allowance for housing (BAH), which is an allowance to offset the cost of housing within the United States when service members do not receive government-provided housing. The amount of BAH service members receive depends on their location, rank, and whether they have dependents. In certain circumstances, as described later in this report, service members normally required to live in barracks instead receive BAH to live in private-sector housing.

DOD's process for developing its budgets, including O&M, Military Personnel, and MILCON requests is summarized below. See figure 3.

¹⁴Each service receives service-specific appropriations mirroring the appropriation titles. The appropriations are placed in service-specific accounts. For example, O&M, Army; Military Personnel, Air Force; or MILCON, Navy.

¹⁵While maintenance and improvements for barracks are funded through O&M appropriation funds, maintenance and improvements for military family housing are funded through a separate appropriation specific to military family housing within the MILCON appropriation.

Figure 3: Department of Defense (DOD) Budget Process as it Applies to Operation and Maintenance (O&M), Military Personnel, and Military Construction (MILCON) Appropriations

Budget development			Fiscal year
Planning	Programming/budgeting	Enactment	Execution
<i>about 18 months prior to budget year</i>		<i>generally during the prior fiscal year</i>	
<p>Budget formulation</p> <p>The military services identify facility sustainment, restoration and modernization requirements as part of their O&M budget. The services also estimate basic allowance for housing requirements, and MILCON project needs for their Military Personnel and MILCON budgets, respectively.</p>	<p>Budget submission</p> <p>DOD submits its complete budget estimate to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). OMB finalizes the budget based on presidential priorities, and the government-wide budget request is transmitted to Congress.^a</p>	<p>Congress deliberates</p> <p>Congress authorizes and appropriates amounts for DOD activities. Amounts appropriated may be above or below amounts requested.</p>	<p>DOD executes appropriated amounts</p> <p>DOD components receive their appropriated amounts and allocate the funding to programs, projects, and activities.</p>

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense information and Office of Management and Budget guidance. | GAO-23-105797

^aSeparately, DOD provides Congress with component-specific budget requests that are presented with more specificity, such as service-specific O&M budget request documentation including sustainment and restoration activity requirements, or MILCON documentation specifying requirements for new barracks construction by installation.

Military Services Do Not Reliably Assess Barracks Conditions, and Some Living Conditions Are Substandard

The military services assess barracks conditions by developing condition scores for each barracks facility, but condition scores have been unreliable with respect to barracks conditions. Further, some barracks pose serious health and safety risks and do not meet DOD standards for privacy and configuration, such as size, number of bedrooms, and kitchen requirements.

Military Services Do Not Reliably Assess Barracks Living Conditions

We found that the military services do not have reliable information about the condition of their barracks. The military services calculate a condition score—a number from 0 to 100—for each barracks facility based on an assessment of up to 13 building systems, such as electrical, plumbing, and foundation, and assessments vary by frequency, which is addressed

below.¹⁶ They use DOD's Sustainment Management System to produce two types of condition scores—facility condition index and building condition index, one or both of which they use to inform funding decisions.¹⁷ For example, the Air Force relies on the building condition index, whereas the Army uses the facility condition index. According to service and installation officials, barracks with low condition scores are more likely to receive funding for maintenance or improvement, because they indicate deteriorating conditions.

However, we observed barracks at seven of 10 military installations we visited that appeared to require significant improvement, despite condition scores above 80. The scores indicated that barracks were in fair or good condition. For example, at one installation, we toured a barracks facility that had been closed for renovation due to long-standing plumbing and electrical issues. According to installation officials, the barracks was uninhabitable. However, at the time the barracks closed, its condition score was above 90, according to service documentation.

Former residents of this barracks told us they experienced months of hot water interruptions and routinely dealt with clogged showers, broken door locks, broken elevators, and apparent mold growth. Senior-enlisted service members—such as first sergeants or those in similar positions—who supervised the junior service members living in these barracks told us living conditions were unacceptable. Also, they stated that the inability to improve housing made it impossible to care for service members in their units, which they identified as a key responsibility for those positions. During our site visit, we observed renovations underway in this barracks. Installation officials told us the total cost of repairs was about \$5 million, which included significant repair to air conditioning, electrical, and

¹⁶The 13 systems are foundation, basement construction, superstructure (e.g., columns, beams, floors), building enclosure (e.g., exterior walls, doors, and windows), roofing, interior construction, stairs, interior finishes (e.g., carpeting, tiles, paint), conveying (i.e., elevators, escalators), plumbing, heating, ventilation and air conditioning, fire protection, and electrical.

¹⁷OSD established the Sustainment Management System as the system of record for facility condition assessments in 2013. See Under Secretary of Defense (Acquisitions, Technology, and Logistics) Memorandum, *Standardizing Facility Condition Assessments* (Sept. 10, 2013). The facility condition index score is a measure of the cost to repair a facility versus replace that facility. As we have previously reported, DOD generally defines condition scores as follows: 90—100 is good condition; 80—89 is fair condition; 60—79 is poor condition, and 0—59 is failing condition. The building condition index score is a measure of the operability of the building systems. Current OSD guidance requires the services to use facility condition index scores for funding decisions, but OSD officials told us they plan to require use of building condition index scores in the future.

plumbing systems, new floors in all bedrooms, and new tiling and showers in all bathrooms.

At another installation in the D.C. metropolitan area, we toured a barracks with a condition score of 86, where about 25 percent of rooms had broken air conditioning. Service members we met with at this installation described living in the barracks without air conditioning on hot days, especially after being outside all day for work or training, as continuous misery. Additionally, at the time of our visit, installation officials provided documentation that showed the same barracks had 12 broken windows, 150 rooms without adequate lighting, and a broken elevator. See figure 4.

Figure 4: Broken and Supplemental Air Conditioning Systems



Source: GAO. | GAO-23-105797

While our site visits did not represent a generalizable sample of military installations, DOD documents, such as reports to Congress, demonstrated similar trends, and service housing officials told us they have concerns about condition score reliability. For example, in a 2022 report to Congress, the Marine Corps identified seven construction projects required to replace existing barracks that had condition scores above 80.¹⁸ Air Force documentation shows that of its barracks considered at-risk of significant degradation, nearly 50 percent have a condition score of 80 or above. Senior Army and Navy housing officials

¹⁸The Marine Corps Report to Congress on improving budgeting for barracks and dormitories in failing conditions was in response to the requirement in Senate Report 117-39 accompanying the Fiscal Year 2022 National Defense Authorization Act.

told us condition scores do not provide sufficiently reliable information on current barracks living conditions.

We identified four possible factors that may affect the reliability of condition scores—the frequency of assessments, the number of building systems assessed, inspector expertise, and the assessment model, as described below.

Frequency. The frequency of condition assessments varies by service, with some services assessing barracks conditions as frequently as 3 years, and others in 10-year intervals. According to service policies, the Navy should conduct barracks assessments every 5 years and the Marine Corps every 3 years. Air Force policy requires assessments every 5 years, but, according to officials, they conduct barracks assessments every 4 years. Army barracks assessments vary in frequency, with requirements between 5 and 10 years, depending on the building system.¹⁹ In contrast, condition assessments for most DOD family housing units typically occur every 2 to 3 years.²⁰

DOD guidance requires the services to conduct condition assessments for all facilities, including barracks, at least once every 5 years. Officials at all 10 installations we visited told us barracks are different from other facilities because they have high usage, high turnover, and experience significant wear and tear due to housing hundreds of enlisted service members. Further, officials from multiple services told us the current frequency of condition assessments, both stated in policy or conducted in practice, is not sufficient for barracks facilities. For example, officials at one installation told us service members routinely return to their barracks with dirty equipment from outdoor training, which increases deterioration of plumbing systems, as well as overall barracks conditions. Further, officials at four installations told us that condition scores are not timely enough to be useful in prioritization decisions. For example, at one installation, officials said that the condition of a barracks can change substantially over a short period of time due to emergent damage, such

¹⁹The Army identifies certain systems as higher priority and requiring more frequent assessments. The maximum time between assessments is 5 years for high priority systems, 7 years for medium priority systems, and every 10 years for low priority systems.

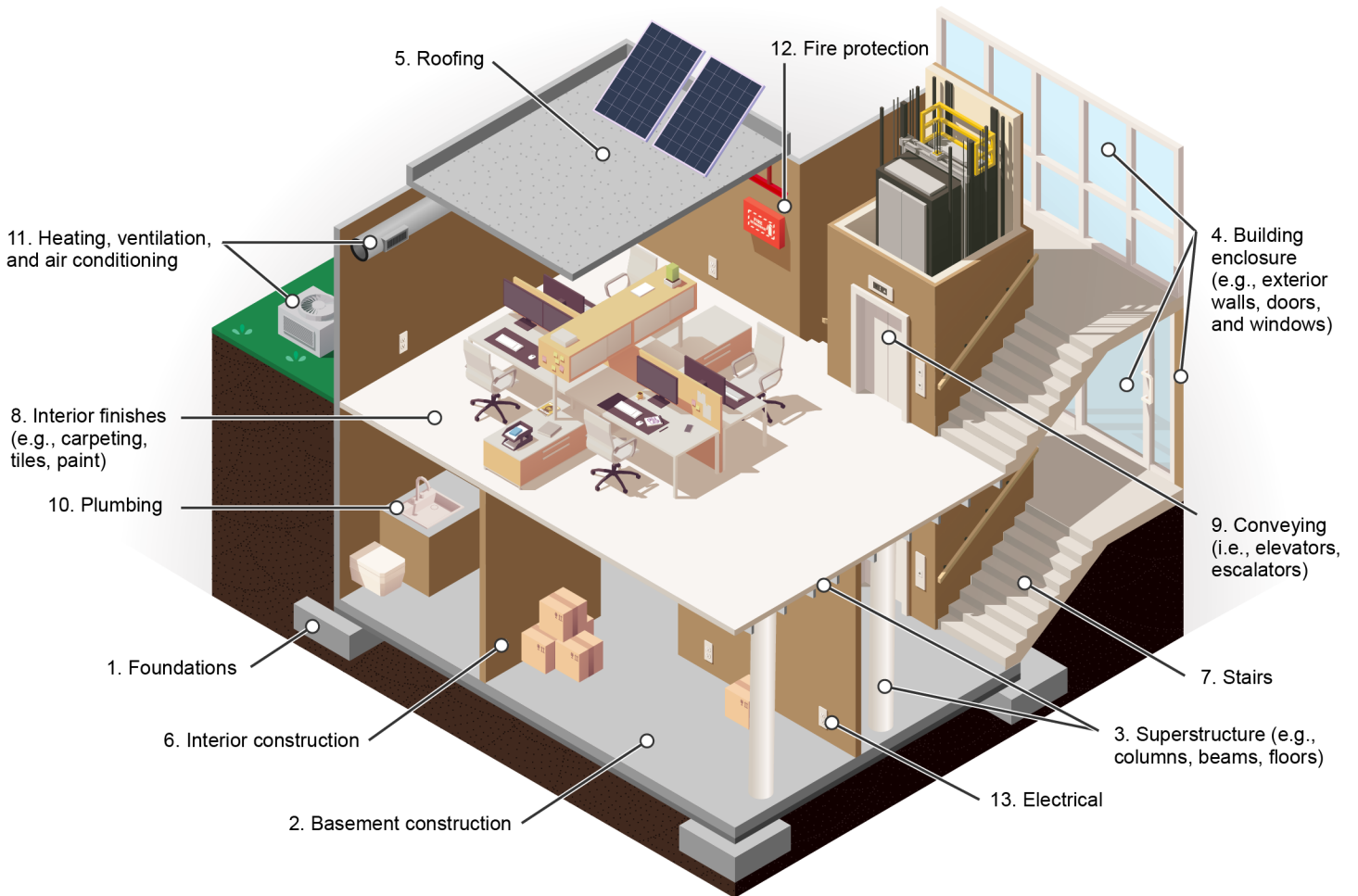
²⁰For context, the Department of Housing and Urban Development should conduct condition assessments of public housing at least biennially to ensure housing is decent, safe, and sanitary. The Department of Housing and Urban Development, *Housing Quality Standards* calls for assessing public housing against 13 key criteria such as space, security, and thermal environment.

as broken air conditioning systems or a roof leak due to a storm. Such events have immediate effects on living conditions.

Numbers of systems. We found that the military services base their condition scores on a varying number of building systems, ranging from 7 to 13, depending on the service. When conducting a facility condition assessment, an inspector assesses building systems, and the Sustainment Management System calculates the condition score based on the combined, weighted scores of those systems. Building systems include heating, ventilation, and air conditioning; roofing; fire protection; interior construction; and electrical, among others.²¹ See figure 5.

²¹Officials at four installations we visited told us condition scores only take into account assessed building systems and do not assess other factors affecting barracks living conditions, such as dim lighting and furnishings. Officials also said that condition scores are not an accurate reflection of living conditions or the quality of life of barracks residents.

Figure 5: Thirteen Systems Included in the Sustainment Management System Module for Assessing the Condition of Buildings



Source: GAO presentation of Department of Defense information; Taras Livvy/stock.adobe.com. | GAO-23-105797

According to service officials, the Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps are to assess all 13 systems. However, during our site visits, we identified differences in the numbers of systems included in assessments. For example, at an Air Force installation, officials told us that assessments were based on seven systems, while officials at a Marine Corps installation told us assessments were based on 11 systems. The Army, the military service with the largest inventory of barracks, gives installations the option either to conduct a comprehensive condition assessment of all 13 building systems or to prioritize assessment of fewer

systems at higher risk for failure, such as electrical or plumbing systems.²² Building systems not assessed using this approach include the building enclosure (exterior doors, walls, and windows) and foundations, among others.

Inspector expertise. Expertise for inspectors conducting condition assessments varies by military service. The Marine Corps and Air Force use inspectors with expertise in various building systems, such as electrical and plumbing systems; heating, ventilation, and air conditioning; and building structure. Officials from these services told us having inspectors with appropriate expertise is critical to ensuring reliable condition scores across barracks inventories. In contrast, the Army and Navy do not provide guidance to installation maintenance offices on what expertise is required.²³ Officials at one Army and two Navy installations told us personnel without appropriate expertise are conducting barracks condition assessments, resulting in unreliable condition scores. For example, officials at one installation told us the expertise of personnel performing condition assessments was inconsistent. Consequently, the reliability of their assessments varies depending on their expertise. In contrast, as we previously reported, the military departments offer training to privatized family housing inspectors.²⁴

Assessment models. The military services use different assessment models to conduct condition assessments. The Marine Corps and Air Force conduct assessments using a service-wide, centralized model, with one office or team of inspectors assessing barracks conditions across all Marine Corps or Air Force installations. Air Force officials told us they previously conducted assessments at the installation level, with each installation conducting its own assessment using installation-identified

²²Assessments for high mission priority buildings include nine building systems, such as interior construction and interior finishes. Assessments for buildings not designated as high mission priority include seven systems, excluding interior construction and interior finishes.

²³When the Army conducted initial assessments using the Sustainment Management System, it used inspectors from architecture and engineering firms with technical expertise.

²⁴In 2023, we reported that the Military Housing Inspector Training course is general. Military housing office officials and private housing representatives said enhanced training requirements would increase the consistency of inspections and improve the overall condition of homes over time. GAO, *Military Housing: DOD Can Further Strengthen Oversight of Its Privatized Housing Program*, [GAO-23-105377](#) (Washington D.C.: April 6, 2023).

inspectors and funds. However, they told us condition scores were inconsistent and not all installations were able to accomplish the condition assessments due to insufficient personnel. According to officials, the Air Force moved to a service-wide, centralized model after 2019 to establish consistency in scores across barracks.²⁵

In contrast, the Army and Navy conduct condition assessments at the installation level, with installations determining whether and when to use resources for barracks condition assessments.²⁶ In addition, Navy officials said that no installation receives sufficient funding to conduct condition assessments for all facilities, and that this results in assessment gaps.

In 2013, DOD required the military services to adopt a common process for facility condition assessments using the Sustainment Management System to support a more credible DOD asset management program and better target fiscal resources to facilities most in need of investment.²⁷ Further, *DOD Instruction 4165.70, Real Property Management*, states that the military services are to maintain reliable and timely information on facility inventories for the purpose of providing the basis of future justifications of capitalization improvement for real property.²⁸ In addition, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* states that management should obtain data from reliable sources in a timely manner and use quality information to make informed decisions.²⁹

According to OSD officials, the military services have continued to work to fully implement the Sustainment Management System and to work toward

²⁵The Air Force also used a centralized model to conduct condition assessments from 1997 until 2017, according to officials.

²⁶The Army used a service-wide model for its initial assessments using the Sustainment Management System.

²⁷Under Secretary of Defense (Acquisitions, Technology, and Logistics) Memorandum, *Standardizing Facility Condition Assessments* (Sept. 10, 2013).

²⁸DOD Instruction 4165.70, *Real Property Management* (Apr. 6, 2005) (Incorporating Change 1, Aug. 31, 2018).

²⁹GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: September 10, 2014).

standardization across services, where appropriate.³⁰ However, OSD has not examined how the services assess barracks conditions. Specifically, OSD has not revisited how frequently the services should conduct assessments, how many systems they should assess, the necessary level of inspector expertise, or the model used to conduct assessments, or whether to use a centralized or de-centralized approach.

OSD officials told us the military services should be assessing the same number of systems and using inspectors with appropriate expertise, and that they are working toward standardization in these areas. They also said that not every aspect of condition assessments, such as frequency or the assessment model, requires standardization. However, we found that all four factors—number of systems, inspector expertise, frequency, and assessment model, may affect the reliability of condition scores. Without examining and providing guidance on how best to assess barracks conditions—including revisiting existing policy, as appropriate—OSD and the military services may not have reliable condition information to appropriately determine which barracks should be prioritized for funding.

Some Barracks Do Not Meet DOD Minimum Standards

Some military barracks do not meet DOD minimum standards for assignment or occupancy, even though the DOD Housing Manual requires that to be suitable for assignment, barracks should pose no serious health or safety risks and meet minimum privacy and room configuration standards.³¹ As part of these requirements, the manual states that barracks should have adequate utility systems, such as

³⁰In 2022, we reported that, according to OSD officials, DOD did not expect to complete the transition to the Sustainment Management System until fiscal year 2025 at the earliest. GAO recommended that DOD conduct an assessment of the Sustainment Management System implementing guidance to determine which elements of the Sustainment Management System should be applied consistently across the components, and use the results of that assessment to update the guidance for the Sustainment Management System condition assessments to ensure that facility condition data are comparable across the department. GAO, *Defense Infrastructure: DOD Should Better Manage Risks Posed by Deferred Facility Maintenance*, [GAO-22-104481](#) (Washington, D.C.: January 31, 2022).

³¹DOD Manual 4165.63, *DOD Housing Management* (Oct. 28, 2010) (incorporating Change 2, Aug. 31, 2018).

Some Military Barracks Pose Potentially Serious Health and Safety Risks

electrical, gas, and air conditioning where climate conditions require it.³² However, we observed and military service members and officials told us that living conditions in some barracks pose potentially serious risks to health and safety and that not all barracks meet minimum privacy and configuration standards.

We found that living conditions in some military barracks may pose potentially serious risks to the physical and mental health of service members, as well as their safety. During site visits, we observed a variety of living conditions that service members and unit leaders told us were negatively affecting them, such as the presence of mold, broken fire alarm systems, and extreme temperatures, among others. Service members in all 12 discussion groups, and first sergeants at eight installations, told us they had concerns about health, safety, or both in the barracks.

Cleanliness. We observed or heard about challenges related to cleanliness in barracks at multiple installations, including issues with sewage, water quality, and pests, among others. At one installation, we noticed a bad odor throughout the barracks. Installation officials told us the smell was methane gas leaking out of aging plumbing with sewage pipes that routinely crack and require replacement. These officials acknowledged that exposure to methane gas is a health risk. See figure 6.

³²The DOD Housing Manual additionally states that for military barracks to be considered in adequate condition, the construction cost for all needed repairs and improvements cannot exceed 20 percent of the replacement cost. To be suitable for assignment or occupancy, it should also have no serious health-safety hazards, be furnished, have food service options, be structurally sound, and have adequate utility systems and services (electrical, gas, potable water, sewer, trash collection, television, Internet, telephone, and where required by climate conditions, heating, ventilation and air-conditioning).

Figure 6: Cleanliness Issues at Military Installations GAO Visited



Sewage overflow in training barracks restroom

Cracked sewage pipes recently removed from barracks

Water damage on barracks hallway ceiling tiles

Pests observed in barracks room

Source: Department of Defense (left); GAO (all others). | GAO-23-105797

Service members or first sergeants at five installations described problems with water quality in the barracks. For example, service members in one discussion group told us tap water in their barracks is often brown and does not appear safe for drinking. Service members in six of 12 discussion groups also told us about issues with pests, including bedbugs, rodents, cockroaches, and wasps. At three of 10 installations, officials told us service members are generally responsible for pest control, or for removing hazardous material from barracks, such as mold and sewage. Further, officials at one installation told us service members are responsible for cleaning biological waste that may remain in a barracks room after a suicide.

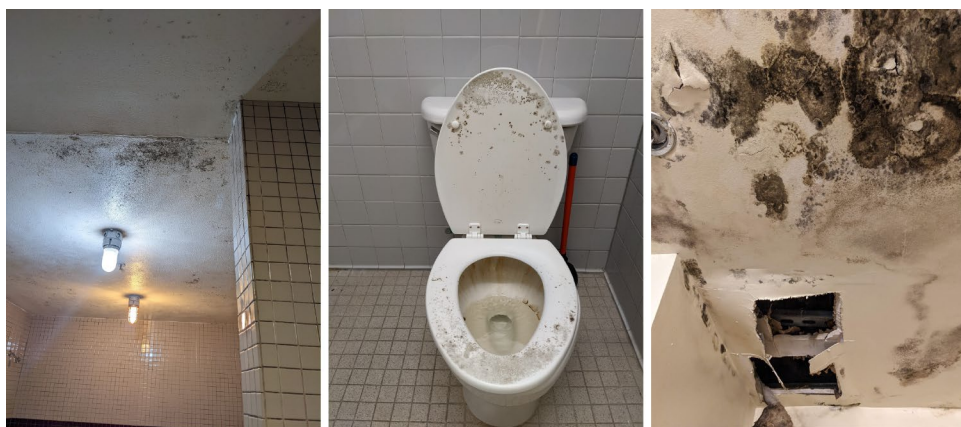
One installation we visited in October 2022 had recently closed barracks due to legionella bacteria found in the building plumbing systems—an issue that has been challenging to remediate, according to officials.³³ When we asked if other barracks on the installation had experienced any issues with legionella bacteria, officials told us that only barracks housing health care patients, and thus subject to Joint Commission health

³³According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, legionella bacteria can cause Legionnaires' disease and Pontiac Fever, collectively known as legionellosis. Legionella bacteria occurs naturally in freshwater environments, like lakes and streams. It can become a health concern when it grows and spreads in human-made building water systems. People can contract Legionnaires' disease or Pontiac Fever when they breathe in small droplets of water in the air that contain Legionella. About one in 10 people who become sick from Legionnaires' disease will die, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

standards, undergo water testing that would reveal legionella. They also said they do not test other barracks to ensure similar levels of water quality and safety because they are not required to do so.

Mold. We observed mold or mildew growth in barracks in occupied barracks rooms, as well as vacant rooms at five installations—sometimes in small amounts, and sometimes in significant amounts.³⁴ See figure 7.

Figure 7: Mold in Barracks Observed during GAO Site Visits



Source: GAO. | GAO-23-105797

Note: Installation officials confirmed that observations documented in the figure above constituted mold.

Service members in all 12 discussion groups told us they considered mold to be a problem in barracks. In one group, a service member reported being aware of a barracks resident who was hospitalized due to a respiratory illness associated with mold. Another service member told us about experiencing respiratory issues attributed to the presence of mold in their barracks. After three visits to the emergency room, the service member was moved to a different barracks without mold and the medical issues were resolved. Service members in one group described regularly having to clean mold themselves; one service member said

³⁴According to the Environmental Protection Agency, mold has the potential to cause health problems, as it produces allergens, irritants, and in some cases potentially toxic substances. Surface sampling may be useful to determine if an area has been adequately cleaned or remediated. Further, sampling for mold should be conducted by professionals who have specific experience in designing mold sampling protocols, sampling methods, and interpreting results, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

regularly cleaning mold with harsh chemicals caused them chronic wheezing.

Extreme temperatures. Officials at all 10 installations we visited told us that broken, malfunctioning, or non-existent heating, ventilation, and air conditioning systems were a problem in barracks. Service members in all 12 discussion groups told us air conditioning affected their quality of life. Specifically, when we asked about effects of barracks conditions on health, service members in five of 12 groups discussed effects on sleep due to temperature. For example, one service member told us that trying to sleep in a barracks room is like standing in the sun all night because of broken air conditioning. Service members in another discussion group told us their rooms can reach over 90 degrees Fahrenheit when air conditioning breaks, and that this has happened frequently. In another group, service members said that, during cold winter months, they have to purchase their own portable space heaters, despite the fire risk, because of broken heating systems. See figure 8.

Figure 8: Broken or Nonexistent Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning Systems



A 12-story barracks without air conditioning



Window air conditioning unit installed in barracks with broken central air conditioning



Ceiling water damage due to broken heating, ventilation, and air conditioning system

Source: GAO. | GAO-23-105797

Overall living conditions. Service members in all 12 discussion groups told us that living conditions in barracks affected their mental health. For example, in one group, a service member told us about increased anxiety

and panic attacks after living in the barracks. In another, a service member said it was depressing to come home to a dark box after work. Service members in three of 12 discussion groups told us barracks conditions contributed to substance abuse. For example, service members in one discussion group said that a barracks resident was recently hospitalized due to a drug overdose. They added that they believe poor living conditions can contribute to increased suicide rates for barracks residents. Overall, service members or first sergeants at three installations brought up concerns about suicide ideation.

In addition to health risks described above, we found that barracks may pose potentially serious risks to service members' safety. At seven of 10 installations we visited, officials or service members living in barracks told us they had concerns about safety in the barracks.

Broken fire safety systems. We observed or heard about malfunctioning or broken fire safety systems at four installations we visited. For example, at one installation, we observed a broken dispatch panel used to alert emergency response teams in case of a fire. At another installation, officials described consistent challenges with non-operational fire suppression systems. They told us that without functional fire safety systems, barracks residents had to take on additional fire-watch duties. See figure 9.

Figure 9: Fire Safety Issues Observed during GAO Site Visits



Source: GAO. | GAO-23-105797

Discussion Group Perspectives

It is difficult to feel safe.

The doors [don't work]. Anyone can access our rooms.

– Barracks residents

Source: GAO discussion groups | GAO-23-105797

Broken windows and door locks. We observed broken door locks and broken first-floor windows at three installations. Service members in one discussion group told us they were concerned that unsecured doors in barracks could allow an intruder to enter the barracks and assault service members, and that this had occurred at another installation. In another discussion group, service members told us they can't lock their doors at night due to broken locks, and they were concerned about security. See figure 10.

Figure 10: Broken Windows Observed during GAO Site Visits



Source: GAO. | GAO-23-105797

Insufficient security and monitoring. At seven of 10 installations we visited, we observed insufficient lighting, vacant units occupied by unauthorized personnel, or no existing or working security cameras.³⁵

³⁵Section 2815 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022 directed the Secretary of Defense to conduct an assessment of all on-base dormitories and barracks at military installations for the purposes of identifying areas, such as exterior sidewalks, entry points, and other public areas where closed-circuit television cameras should be installed, among other assessments related to improving the security of living spaces on military installations. According to officials, DOD is analyzing the need for security cameras and plans to include a position on the topic in a forthcoming report to Congress.

First sergeants at one installation told us an ex-spouse broke in and physically assaulted a service member in the barracks and that poorly lit hallways, blind spots in hallways and corridors, and lack of security cameras made barracks difficult to monitor. At one installation, we observed a vacant barracks room that, according to the barracks manager, was occupied by an unauthorized person who had been using a broken first-floor window to access the room. See figure 11.

Figure 11: Security Issues Observed during GAO Site Visits



Observed barracks room occupied by an unauthorized person

Source: GAO. | GAO-23-105797

Note: During a tour of barracks at one installation, we observed a room occupied by an unauthorized person. Installation officials told us a service member who was no longer in the military had remained on the installation after being discharged and had been living in the above barracks room. During our tour, the barracks manager reported and resolved the issue with unit leadership.

Officials at two installations reported to us incidents of squatters living in vacant barracks rooms, and we observed evidence of this problem. In one barracks where we observed working security cameras, installation officials told us unit commanders had approved funding to purchase and maintain these systems from unit funds.

Crime. At four of 10 installations, service members living in barracks or first sergeants told us the conditions described above contributed to an environment where theft, property damage, and sexual assault were more likely. In three of 12 discussion groups, service members said they were concerned about the risk of sexual assault for those living in barracks. According to DOD data, out of 37,100 incidents of sexual assault reported to DOD from fiscal year 2015 to 2021, about 11,200 incidents occurred in on-base housing, including barracks. Of these, the vast majority of victims—about 10,600—were enlisted service members with the rank of E-5 or below, generally the population living in barracks.

Although our site visit observations cannot be generalized, Navy and Marine Corps surveys conducted in 2022 of service members living in barracks identified similar concerns related to health and safety, such as issues with lighting, mold, and water quality. In 2022, the Army conducted a survey of some barracks residents and senior-enlisted service members responsible for managing barracks facilities at five selected installations. The survey asked questions about health and safety, such as service member experiences with depression, suicide ideation, and sexual assault in barracks, among others. According to documentation of Army survey results, barracks conditions had negative effects for some survey respondents, including effects on physical health, such as poor sleep quality, and on mental health, such as feeling trapped, lonely, or depressed. Results also showed concerns related to safety in barracks housing, including the lack of security cameras and incidents of sexual assault. For example, some respondents reported feeling unsafe in their barracks, and some respondents, including senior-enlisted service members, reported that security cameras could increase safety.³⁶

The DOD Housing Manual indicates that barracks must be free of serious risks to health and safety to be suitable for assignment or occupancy, and all service policies state that barracks are to be kept in a safe condition for residents. However, the DOD guidance lacks specific details on what constitutes health and safety risks and, as such, does not provide clear direction to the military services on requirements for maintaining barracks. In the absence of clear DOD guidance, military service guidance varies, and no military service has defined in guidance specific minimum standards for health and safety that, if unmet, indicate barracks are not

³⁶In this context, we use the term senior-enlisted to refer to service members with ranks E-6 and above who responded to this Army survey.

suitable for assignment. For example, Army and Marine Corps guidance generally state that barracks must be safe, clean, and comfortable, but do not establish minimum health and safety standards as a condition of assignment to barracks.³⁷ Navy and Air Force guidance provide direction for remediating certain health risks in barracks, such as asbestos or lead, and for relocating service members depending on the circumstances.³⁸ However, these health and safety risks are not comprehensive and are not explicitly tied to minimum standards for assignment to barracks.

DOD has established a health and safety inspection checklist for all privatized family housing that defines serious health and safety risks for residents. As we have previously reported, since 2019, the military services have increased inspections of privatized family housing, and all military services currently use this standardized checklist when a change of occupancy takes place.³⁹ The checklist examines multiple aspects of safety in privatized family housing, such as checking whether the air conditioning is in working order, and taking mold and moisture control measurements and readings. It also addresses whether the unit is free of any identified gas hazards and is free of pests, whether fire safety systems exist and are operable, and whether all exterior doors and windows properly open, close and lock, among others. We previously reported that, according to officials, if a home fails the inspection checklist, the private housing company should not make the home available to a new resident until it has passed inspection.⁴⁰

According to service officials, installations use the same health and safety checklist for barracks. However, unlike for privatized family housing, service officials acknowledged that service members may be assigned to barracks rooms that have failed the inspection checklist.

³⁷Marine Corps Order 11000.22, *Marine Corps Bachelor and Family Housing Management*; Army Regulation 420-1, *Army Facilities Management*.

³⁸CNIC M-11103.2: *Unaccompanied Housing Operations Manual*; Air Force Instruction 32-6000, *Housing Management*.

³⁹While we support DOD's use of the health and safety inspection checklist, in April 2023 we made a recommendation that DOD establish department wide turnover inspection guidance that includes clear and consistent inspection standards for assigning ratings to each of the components evaluated in the checklist. OSD concurred with this recommendation, and as of June 2023 the recommendation has not been implemented. GAO, *Military Housing: DOD Can Further Strengthen Oversight of Its Privatized Housing Program*, [GAO-23-105377](#) (Washington, D.C.: April 6, 2023)

⁴⁰[GAO-23-105377](#).

Without updated DOD guidance to clarify minimum health and safety standards for barracks assignment or occupancy, and service policies that reflect these updated DOD standards, service members may continue to live in barracks that pose potentially significant risks to their health and safety. Clear DOD guidance on health and safety risks serious enough to prevent installations from assigning service members to live in a barracks facility or room would help ensure service members are not assigned to live in uninhabitable barracks.

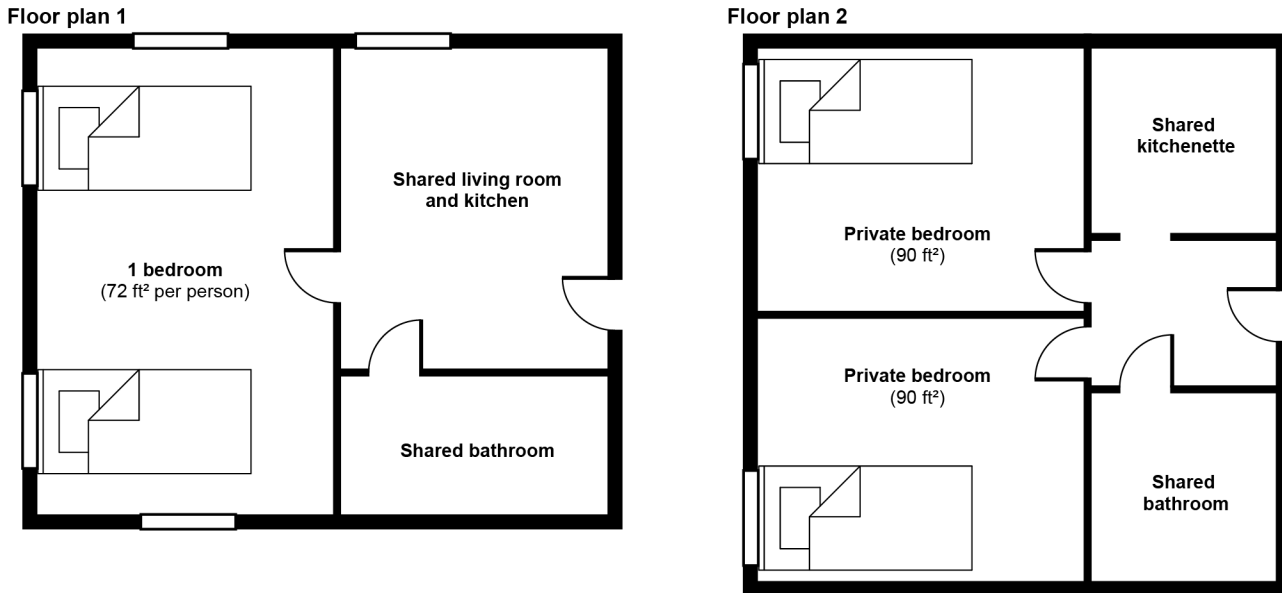
Some Military Barracks Do Not Meet Privacy and Configuration Standards

DOD has set minimum standards for assignment or occupancy to barracks related to privacy and configuration—requirements such as how much square footage each service member should have—but permanent party barracks do not always meet these standards.⁴¹ According to guidance, DOD minimum standards for permanent party barracks for service members in ranks E1 to E4 offer two options, both of which require a barracks unit to have two rooms—either two private bedrooms or one shared bedroom and a living room—as well as a kitchen or kitchenette for preparing food.⁴² See figure 12.

⁴¹DOD guidance also sets minimum standards for assignment or occupancy related to privacy and configuration for training barracks. We found that service minimum standards for assignment or occupancy to training barracks generally meet DOD standards.

⁴²DOD guidance sets separate minimum standards for construction of new barracks, which apply to MILCON barracks projects but do not apply to existing barracks facilities. Minimum standards for assignment or occupancy to barracks apply to all barracks where service members live, not just to new construction.

Figure 12: Examples of Barracks Configurations That Meet Department of Defense (DOD) Minimum Standards for Privacy and Configuration



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense documentation. | GAO-23-105797

Note: The DOD Housing Manual states that service members with ranks of E1 to E4 will share a bedroom and bathroom with at most one other person in a configuration that includes a living room and kitchen. In addition, service members in a shared unit without a living room will have private bedrooms and bathrooms shared with no more than one other person, and such units will include a kitchenette. Room layouts in this figure provide examples of layouts that would be consistent with minimum standards for privacy and configuration. Other variations of these layouts may also meet minimum privacy and configuration standards included in the DOD Housing Manual.

Both configurations provide some degree of privacy, allowing two separate rooms for two service members even if sleeping quarters are shared, and limit the number of service members sharing a bathroom to two.

However, during our site visits, we observed barracks that do not meet these standards. For example, we identified barracks at six of 10 installations that did not meet the DOD standard that, for units without living rooms, each service member should have a private bedroom, and no more than two service members should share a bathroom. At these six installations, we found that two, or even three, service members shared one bedroom and one bathroom, but did not have a living room. See figure 13.

Figure 13: Barracks Rooms Not Meeting Department of Defense (DOD) Minimum Standards for Privacy and Configuration; Observations during GAO Site Visits



Source: GAO. | GAO-23-105797

Service members in 10 of 12 discussion groups told us that lack of privacy and insufficient space has negative effects, including contributing to poor mental health and affecting sleep quality or work performance. For example, service members in one discussion group said these problems can be exacerbated if one roommate works day shifts and the other works night shifts. They also said that lack of privacy in barracks makes it difficult to relax at home and increases stress. In another group, service members said a lack of privacy increases interpersonal tension, which can, in turn, undermine unit cohesion and affect work performance. Similarly, a 2022 Army report to Congress stated that Army behavioral and social health experts had concluded that sharing a bedroom is detrimental to soldier resilience. This report was based on a prior Army study, which, according to the 2022 report, found that installations with a low proportion of private rooms had increased rates of serious arguments, bullying, and low unit cohesion.⁴³

During our site visits, we also observed barracks at six of 10 installations that did not provide kitchenettes when they were supposed to, although they did offer some minimal equipment for storing and preparing food. Under DOD standards, permanent party barracks without living rooms must include a kitchenette. However, we toured permanent party barracks rooms at these six installations that provided only a refrigerator and

⁴³Office of the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Installations, Energy and Environment, *Report to Congress on Army Unaccompanied Housing* (May 2022).

microwave.⁴⁴ At one installation, we observed a barracks room with a microwave and nothing else. By comparison, permanent party barracks at four installations generally offered kitchenettes with amenities, such as stovetops, cabinet storage, countertops, sinks, and kitchen tables, in addition to microwaves and refrigerators. We observed a wide variety of food preparation and storage equipment. See figure 14.

Figure 14: Variation in Food Preparation and Storage Equipment across Site Visit Locations



Source: GAO. | GAO-23-105797

Service members in 10 of 12 discussion groups told us the lack of or limited access to kitchens or kitchenettes in the barracks negatively

⁴⁴The DOD Housing Manual does not include a definition for kitchenette. For the purposes of our analysis, we concluded a barracks room did not have a kitchenette if we did not observe in the barracks room at least one additional kitchen amenity beyond a refrigerator or microwave, such as a stovetop with 1 or more burners, cabinet storage, countertops, a sink outside the bathroom, or kitchen table. This definition is consistent with statements from a service housing official.

affected them.⁴⁵ For example, service members in one discussion group said their only access to kitchen facilities, beyond the refrigerators and microwaves in their rooms, were central kitchens that hundreds of residents share. They also said that central kitchens are often in use, may be dirty, have broken appliances, and are not viable options for regular meal preparation. Other service members told us that, because of similar challenges, they generally rely on microwaveable meals or fast food, leading to health problems. Service members in three of 12 discussion groups told us having a kitchen has positive effects, such as improvements to physical health. In addition, some respondents to the same Army survey described above reported preferring barracks with kitchens.

Although the DOD Housing Manual sets clear privacy and configuration standards for assignment to barracks, service-specific standards for assignment to permanent party barracks do not meet DOD standards, as required by DOD guidance. In addition, DOD guidance effectively allows the services to maintain barracks below those standards through the use of waivers.

Service-specific standards. As detailed above, the DOD Housing Manual prescribes minimum privacy and configuration standards required for barracks to be considered suitable for assignment or occupancy. The manual further states that the military services should establish their own minimum standards for barracks based on these standards.

As a result, the services have established standards that vary, in some cases widely, from the DOD standards.⁴⁶ When we compared the services' privacy and configuration standards for permanent party barracks to those in the DOD Housing Manual, we found that none fully incorporates the DOD standard, although there are a few areas where the services' standards accurately reflect or even exceed the minimum standards set by DOD. For example, all services' standards align with or

⁴⁵Of the two discussion groups that did not discuss negative effects due to limited kitchen access, one group lived in privatized barracks where the majority of service members we met with lived in units with kitchens. The second group lived in government-owned barracks, which also included kitchens.

⁴⁶Air Force Instruction 32-6000, *Housing Management (Mar. 18, 2020)*(incorporating *Department of the Air Force Guidance Memorandum 2023-01*, June 12, 2023); Army Regulation 420-1, *Army Facilities Management* (Feb. 12, 2008)(incorporating Rapid Action Revision, Aug. 24, 2012); CNIC Manual 11 103.2, *Unaccompanied Housing Operations Management* (Jan. 23, 2019); Marine Corps Order 11000.22, *Marine Corps Bachelor and Family Housing Management* (Jan.22, 2018).

exceed the minimum square footage requirement, but none reflects the requirement to provide a kitchenette. The Air Force's standards incorporate more DOD standards than any other service, while the Army incorporates the least. For example, the Army allows up to four service members to share a bedroom, even though DOD standards state that no more than two service members should share a bedroom. See table 2.

Table 2: Comparison of DOD Minimum Privacy and Configuration Standards against Military Service Standards for Permanent Party Barracks, Ranks E1 to E4

		DOD	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force
Unit without a living room	Minimum square footage	90 per bedroom	●	●	●	●+
	# Sharing bedroom	Private bedroom	○	◐	○	●
	# Sharing bathroom	2	○	●	○	●
	Food preparation	Kitchenette	○	○	○	○
Unit with a living room	Minimum square footage (bedroom)	72 per person	●+	●	●	●
	# Sharing bedroom	2	○	◐	●	●
	# Sharing bathroom	2	○	●	●	●
	Food preparation	Kitchen	○	○	●	●

Legend:

- = Meets DOD minimum standards for privacy and configuration
- ◐= Partially meets DOD minimum standards
- = Does not meet DOD minimum standards
- + = Exceeds DOD minimum standards
- = Not applicable because Air Force minimum standards do not include a configuration with a living room

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) and Service Documentation. | GAO-23-105797

Waivers. In addition, DOD guidance allows the services to waive barracks from complying with the standards. Specifically, the DOD Housing Manual states that the services can waive standards for no more than 1 year, due to military necessity, with exceptions for longer periods of time upon approval by the Secretary of a military department. Moreover, it does not set any time limit on waivers approved by the Secretary of a military department or stipulate any requirements for documenting or tracking waivers. For example, it does not require the services to document the specific reasons for granting waivers, either temporarily or beyond 1 year, or to track how many waivers are in place.

As a result, the services have interpreted the waiver provision loosely, as detailed below, and have limited documentation on their use of waivers.

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- According to Army officials, the Army effectively waives all barracks from DOD minimum standards because its service-specific standards, issued in 2008, are below those of DOD and were signed by the Secretary of the Army. In other words, the Army's standards constitute the Army's waiver. Further, the Army does not issue waivers when individual barracks fail to meet DOD standards because the service interprets the waiver requirement in the DOD Housing Manual to relate only to DOD standards.
 - Like the Army, the Marine Corps considers its service-level guidance, issued in 2018, to be a blanket waiver from DOD standards. However, unlike the Army, it also issues waivers when individual barracks do not meet its service-level standards. For example, according to installation documentation and officials, the Marine Corps issued a waiver at one installation to allow three service members to share a bedroom to ensure service members in the same military unit could be housed together. Conversely, the Marine Corps does not issue a waiver if two service members share a unit that does not have a living room, because this configuration meets the Marine Corps' minimum standards, even though it does not meet DOD minimum standards.
 - The Navy also issued a blanket waiver to DOD standards; however, it documented that waiver in guidance separate from its standards. That waiver has remained in place since 2002, but, according to a senior Navy housing official, was intended as a temporary solution to ensure service members assigned to ships could live in barracks while in port. In addition, the official told us the Navy issues waivers for individual barracks, but only when they do not meet minimum privacy standards, such as the number of sailors sharing a bedroom or bathroom. It does not issue waivers when barracks fail to meet configuration standards, such as when they do not have kitchens, but should, according to DOD standards.
 - Air Force officials told us all Air Force barracks meet or exceed DOD standards and, therefore, no blanket waiver is required. We observed permanent party barracks at one installation that provided kitchenettes when they were supposed to; kitchenettes included some minimal equipment for storing and preparing food, though they did not include stovetops. According to installation officials, lack of stovetops for cooking was a common complaint from barracks residents. In March 2023, Air Force officials informed us that two installations had recently requested temporary waivers to privacy standards, indicating that the service may issue waivers in at least some instances when individual barracks do not meet DOD standards.

DOD's Housing Manual requires that DOD housing—including barracks—be operated and maintained to a standard that provides comfortable living places and that generally reflects contemporary community living standards. When we raised the issue of substandard barracks with OSD officials, they said they were unaware that the services' privacy and configuration standards generally did not meet those prescribed in the manual, but they also emphasized that the services are meant to have flexibility in how they manage their barracks programs.⁴⁷ When we raised the issue of substandard housing with service-level officials, they acknowledged that their standards are below DOD's, but also said they agreed that DOD guidance allows a level of flexibility in determining service level standards. Officials also said that higher standards would be challenging to achieve, especially for older barracks. For example, installation officials told us it is challenging and costly to retrofit older barracks facilities with kitchens, as these facilities do not always have space for the electrical systems needed to install kitchen appliances.

However, service standards for privacy and configuration below DOD standards have effectively allowed the military services to house service members in barracks that are well below existing standards for assignment or occupancy. As service members told us in discussion groups, barracks that do not provide them sufficient privacy or access to kitchen facilities can have detrimental effects on their mental and physical health. Without updated service privacy and configuration standards that meet DOD standards, substandard barracks will continue to be used to house service members.

In addition, by not setting clear requirements related to waivers, OSD has missed an opportunity to gain visibility into the extent to which service members are living in substandard barracks—information that could help target resources where they are most needed. For example, setting clear requirements for tracking and documenting waivers, such as the reason an installation needs a waiver, the number of barracks and service members affected, and the estimated cost for bringing barracks up to standards, could help both OSD and the services make risk-based decisions on where to prioritize resources. In addition, setting clear requirements regarding time limits for waivers would prevent the military services from establishing waivers in perpetuity, as has occurred, and encourage progress. Although none of the services comprehensively

⁴⁷OSD officials also said they do not have sufficient staff to compare DOD's minimum standards to the services'.

documents and tracks waivers to DOD standards for individual barracks, information we obtained from the Navy and Marine Corps indicates that at least thousands of service members are affected. According to these services' officials, about 5,000 sailors and 17,000 Marines lived in substandard barracks, as of March 2023.⁴⁸

DOD Does Not Sufficiently Assess the Effects of Barracks Conditions on Quality of Life and Readiness

The military services use varying methods to assess the effects of barracks conditions on service member quality of life. However, their methods are not consistent and do not fully align with DOD requirements, and DOD does not routinely assess the effects of barracks conditions on quality of life. The military services have some methods for assessing effects of barracks conditions on readiness—such as a one-time survey of barracks residents—however, the information the services obtain from these methods is insufficient or unreliable.

Military Services Do Not Use Consistent Approaches or Fully Meet DOD Requirements for Assessing Effects of Barracks Conditions on Service Member Quality of Life and Readiness

Military Services Use Varying Approaches to Implement Statutory Requirement Regarding Tenant Satisfaction Survey

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020 required each military installation to administer the same tenant satisfaction survey for service members living in all military housing.⁴⁹ Further, the DOD Housing Manual requires the services to periodically evaluate service members' satisfaction with their housing using surveys. According to the same manual, military housing includes government-owned barracks. However, a 2020 Chief Housing Officer memorandum that provides direction to the military departments regarding the tenant satisfaction survey required the services to survey only residents of privatized or government-owned family housing and privatized barracks, omitting

⁴⁸These figures are likely underestimated because the Navy and Marine Corps only issue waivers in certain circumstances, as noted above.

⁴⁹Pub. L. No. 116-92, § 3058 (2019).

government-owned barracks.⁵⁰ OSD officials told us they do not interpret the congressional requirement to include government-owned barracks because of the unique nature of the barracks residents and because the services preferred to maintain their existing survey methods.⁵¹

Discussion Group Perspectives

It takes a lot longer than a month, sometimes 3 months, for maintenance to come and check out an issue.

There is a leak and black mold in the shower and maintenance still won't fix it, no matter how often it is reported.

It is continuous misery to be in hot conditions with no air conditioning.

- Barracks residents

Source: GAO discussion groups | GAO-23-105797

Navy and Marine Corps. Both the Navy and the Marine Corps use the annual tenant satisfaction survey to assess effects of housing condition on residents of all military housing, including government-owned barracks. These services use survey results to identify concerns, and identify steps to improve quality of life for service members.⁵² According to Navy and Marine Corps documentation of 2022 survey results, satisfaction with barracks housing varied by installation, with some installations scoring high, and others scoring low. For example, service documentation of survey results showed satisfaction scores as high as 86 out of 100, and as low as 36 for Navy and Marine Corps installations we visited. Common concerns for survey respondents included issues with the quality of maintenance services, such as lack of responsiveness to resident requests. Similarly, in all 12 discussion groups, barracks residents expressed concerns regarding maintenance issues. Across both services, the lowest scoring questions generally related to the desire of residents to continue living in their current housing.

Navy and Marine Corps officials told us they have used tenant satisfaction survey results to identify problems and potential solutions for barracks, and to improve installation-level customer service. Officials from both services told us they require that installations scoring below a minimum threshold in any survey category develop and implement action plans on addressing identified issues. For example, survey results for barracks at one Navy installation showed low satisfaction with maintenance follow-up. The action plan for that installation called for weekly follow-up with barracks residents on the status of maintenance work to improve resident satisfaction. At one Marine Corps installation, survey results showed dissatisfaction with broken washers and dryers,

⁵⁰The memorandum directs the military services to conduct the annual Tenant Satisfaction Survey for "all privatized housing and all government-owned or leased family housing." Assistant Secretary of Defense for Sustainment Memorandum, *Tenant Satisfaction Survey Policy for DOD Privatized, Owned or Leased Housing* (Nov. 16, 2020).

⁵¹Each military service administers the tenant satisfaction survey for residents of government-owned family housing and privatized military housing, as required by OSD.

⁵²The tenant satisfaction survey assesses the effects of barracks conditions on service member quality of life, asking questions about service members' overall satisfaction with barracks conditions and property management services.

and a lack of responsiveness to these issues by maintenance personnel. The action plan for that installation called for improving maintenance response by developing and conducting consistent training.

Army and Air Force. In contrast, the Air Force does not use the tenant satisfaction survey for barracks residents, and the Army uses it only to survey residents of privatized, and not government-owned, barracks. For government-owned barracks, instead of the tenant satisfaction survey, both services used one-time or ad hoc survey methods to gather more limited information regarding the effects of barracks conditions on service members. According to Army and Air Force officials, OSD guidance requires the services to administer tenant satisfaction surveys only for residents of government-owned family housing and privatized housing. As such, officials told us their service uses the survey only for these housing types. Army and Air Force officials also told us the survey would not yield actionable insights for improving barracks conditions because tenant satisfaction survey questions are not all relevant for barracks residents.

In addition, Army officials said that surveying service members living in barracks is too difficult, in part because this population is hard to reach. For example, they told us the Army does not require these service members to provide certain contact information, such as personal emails or telephone numbers, which could improve access to surveys for service members who do not have immediate access to their military email.⁵³ They also said that many junior-enlisted service members would not provide this contact information, if asked.

In the absence of an annual tenant satisfaction survey for barracks residents, the Army and the Air Force have used other methods to gather more limited information regarding the effects of barracks conditions on service members. For example, in 2022, the Army administered a one-time survey at five installations to gather service member input about barracks designs and features, as well as effects on service member quality of life, among other topics.⁵⁴ According to Army documentation of

⁵³According to Army officials, service members' military email addresses are recorded when assigned to barracks rooms. However, they also said that personal emails or cell phone numbers would allow service members without regular access to computers to respond to surveys using cell phones and improve survey response rates.

⁵⁴According to Army officials, Army selected these five installations to best sample Army's overall population of service members residing in barracks.

survey results, some respondents reported poor quality of life in barracks, and low satisfaction with barracks conditions.

Further, some respondents reported negative effects of barracks conditions on their physical and mental health, as well as a lack of safety and security in barracks. The Army plans to use these survey results to inform decision-making for barracks housing programs going forward. Army officials also told us survey results will inform the development of new barracks construction standards, including what features will most improve quality of life.⁵⁵ The Army plans to administer periodic surveys of barracks residents in the future.

Air Force officials told us they sometimes administer surveys at the installation-level—such as ad-hoc, informal exit interviews or unit commander surveys—to gather information on barracks conditions and their effects on service members. However, officials did not express the need for additional or more consistent surveys on these topics. At one Air Force installation we visited, we learned that service members living in training barracks take end-of-course surveys at the conclusion of training, and these can include questions on barracks conditions. One Air Force barracks manager told us about an ad-hoc survey of service members living in one barracks facility. This official said that survey results prompted concrete changes, such as adding personal storage lockers for pantry and kitchen items in a communal kitchen. However, the Air Force does not compile results of surveys at the installation-level, and does not use such results to inform Air Force-wide improvements to barracks housing programs.

Despite the military services' varying approaches to the tenant satisfaction survey, and the effects of barracks conditions on quality of life, OSD has not updated guidance on the tenant satisfaction survey. For example, OSD could direct the military services to expand the survey to service members living in barracks, or to otherwise ensure that the military services survey service members living in barracks in a consistent and comparable way. As a result, the Army and Air Force, pointing to the absence of a DOD requirement, do not administer the survey to barracks residents. OSD officials told us they have discussed with the military

⁵⁵The survey included questions on service members' preferences for barracks design and configuration, such as bedroom layout, recreation facilities, and kitchen and laundry amenities.

services the possibility of developing new or revising existing surveys for barracks residents.

Without updated DOD guidance to ensure a consistent approach to surveying barracks residents, the military services will not be positioned to assess the effects of barracks conditions and potential improvements to quality of life for service members living in barracks. According to our analysis of DOD data, in fiscal year 2022, over 148,000 service members in the Army and Air Force lived in military barracks in the United States. Army and Air Force leadership, in particular, may be unaware of effects on quality of life stemming from living conditions in barracks, and may not be positioned to make improvements for the thousands of service members required to live in barracks.

OSD Does Not Routinely Assess the Effects of Barracks Conditions on Quality of Life or Readiness

OSD does not routinely monitor the effects of barracks conditions on service members' quality of life or readiness, despite DOD requirements to monitor morale and welfare aspects of the housing program. Officials from the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness told us they do not monitor the effects of barracks conditions because they believe that barracks conditions are a less important factor affecting service members' quality of life when compared to other factors. For example, they said other factors are more important, such as a spouse's satisfaction with the military way of life, or opportunities to progress in a career field. Further, officials said that most service members are married, and that unaccompanied service members are a comparatively smaller population. Personnel and Readiness officials also provided differing perspectives. Some indicated that, while housing conditions touch on quality of life, they consider housing to be separate from quality of life. Other officials, however, disagreed and indicated that this does not reflect the position of Personnel and Readiness.

In contrast, officials or service members at all 10 military installations we visited told us barracks conditions directly affect service members' quality of life and readiness. For example, service members in nine out of 12 discussion groups we conducted told us poor barracks conditions negatively affect their quality of life when we asked what they like or do not like about the conditions in their barracks.

Discussion Group and Senior-Enlisted Service Member Perspectives

We had to lower standards for field training to keep [service members] mentally in the game. Had to do it because when they get out of [training], they can't take a hot shower [in the barracks], or sleep with a locked door.

- Senior-enlisted service member

Thousands of service members come through this base for training every year and live in these barracks. They go home and tell their friends and family not to join the military because of living conditions.

-Senior-enlisted service member

Sometimes I find myself getting frustrated at work and missing small things. A small mistake can be a security issue, and a really big problem. Going home to the barracks, those small mistakes are easier to make.

-Barracks resident

Source: GAO discussion groups and interviews | GAO-23-105797

In addition, officials at multiple installations we visited told us poor barracks conditions lower morale and affect readiness. Enlisted service members from all military services told us poor living conditions negatively affect work performance, training, and DOD's ability to recruit qualified personnel. For example, senior-enlisted service members at all 10 installations we visited told us poor living conditions contributed to reduced productivity at work, had negative effects on training, or negatively affected perceptions about serving in the military.

The Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness is the Principal Staff Advisor to the Secretary of Defense for morale, welfare, and quality-of-life matters, and is responsible for developing policy, plans, and programs related to the quality of life of service members, including specifically for housing.⁵⁶ Further, the DOD Housing Manual directs Personnel and Readiness to monitor the morale and welfare aspects of DOD housing, which includes barracks. However, Personnel and Readiness officials told us managing military barracks, including monitoring the effects of barracks conditions on service member quality of life and readiness, is generally the responsibility of each military service, and not OSD.

Although Personnel and Readiness does not monitor the effects of barracks conditions on service members, it does collect information to support monitoring on a variety of other topics related to quality of life. For example, the Office of People Analytics, an office within the Personnel and Readiness organization, coordinates with relevant OSD offices to develop and administer the annual Status of Forces survey. This survey assesses the attitudes and opinions of the DOD community on a range of personnel issues, such as those related to quality of life.⁵⁷ In addition to the Status of Forces survey, the Office of People Analytics uses other methods to assess quality-of-life issues affecting service members, according to officials. For example, officials told us they use surveys and focus groups to assess specific quality-of-life issues, such as spouse

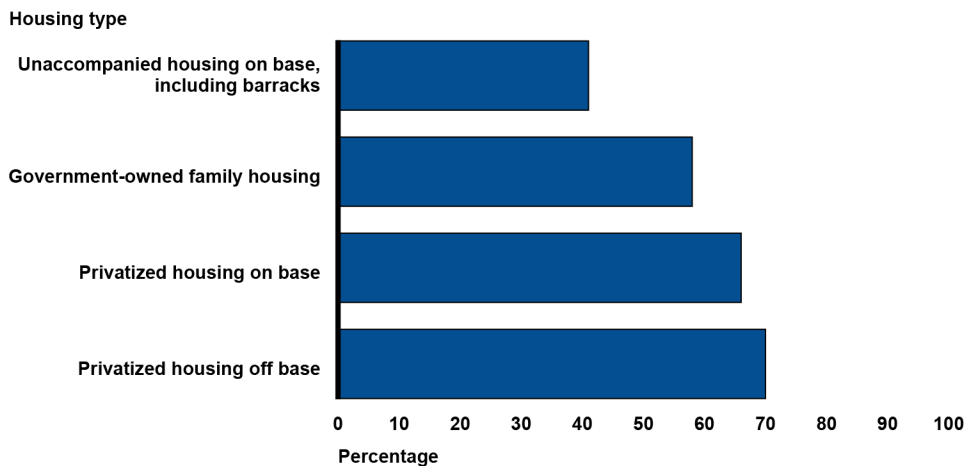
⁵⁶Department of Defense Directive 5124.02, *Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness (USD(P&R))*, (June 23, 2008).

⁵⁷The Status of Forces survey assesses the attitudes and opinions of the DOD community on a range of personnel issues that affect service members, their careers, and their families. In addition to quality-of-life questions, the Status of Forces survey also includes questions on reenlistment and retention, which Personnel and Readiness can use to make policy decisions, according to officials. However, these questions generally do not ask specifically about the effects of barracks housing and living conditions on reenlistment. One question about the factors service members consider important in making reenlistment decisions includes housing as one of 29 optional selections.

unemployment, food insecurity, and sexual assault. Officials said relevant OSD offices use data from these survey methods in monitoring quality of life, and to strengthen support within DOD for identified issues and to inform programming needs, including budgeting.

Personnel and Readiness previously collected information on service member satisfaction with barracks through the Status of Forces survey—information useful for monitoring of morale and welfare aspects of barracks housing. Specifically, as recently as 2019, the survey asked service members whether they currently lived in government-owned barracks on base or privatized housing off base, among other housing types. The survey also included questions on service members' satisfaction with the physical condition and affordability of their housing. Combined, these questions provided Personnel and Readiness with timely survey results about the effects of barracks conditions on quality of life. According to 2019 Status of Forces survey results, service members living in barracks generally were less satisfied than were service members living in other types of military housing. See figure 15.

Figure 15: Estimated Percentage of Active-Duty Service Members Satisfied with Military Housing in 2019, by Housing Type



Source: GAO analysis of 2019 Status of Forces Survey. | GAO-23-105797

Note: The Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness administers the Status of Forces survey to assess a range of personnel issues. Through 2019, the survey included three questions on service members' satisfaction with their housing, its physical condition, and affordability. Data are from a tabulation of housing satisfaction question results from the 2019 Status of Forces Survey of Active-Duty Members prepared by the Office of People Analytics. Unaccompanied housing on base includes barracks as well as other types of unaccompanied housing, such as housing for senior-enlisted service members and for officers. All estimates in this figure have margins of error at the 95 percent confidence level of plus or minus 9 percentage points or fewer.

However, according to officials, after 2019, the Office of People Analytics removed housing satisfaction questions from the Status of Forces survey both because it was not a priority and to reduce survey length. Specifically, officials told us the Office of Management and Budget required cuts to government surveys to reduce survey length and increase response rates. As a result, they removed some questions from the Status of Forces Survey that were not congressionally required, including housing questions. Further, while relevant OSD offices can be involved with the Status of Forces survey by providing input on included questions or requesting survey results or briefings, officials said they have not coordinated with Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Housing on the Status of Forces survey since the removal of housing questions from the survey. OSD officials from this office told us they were not consulted about the removal of these questions from the survey.

Officials from the Office of People Analytics also told us the military services conduct their own surveys related to housing, and that DOD-wide survey questions on the topic would be redundant. However, as described previously, the Army and the Air Force do not consistently or systematically survey service members on the effects of barracks conditions on quality of life. In addition, officials from the Navy and Marine Corps—the two services surveying barracks residents annually—told us the surveys use different methodologies to compile results, making it challenging to compare across military services. Moreover, Personnel and Readiness officials told us the military services often rely on DOD-level surveys, such as the Status of Forces survey, for quality-of-life insights.

There are no plans to reintroduce housing questions to the Status of Forces survey, according to officials. Without department-wide information collection on housing satisfaction, such as through the Status of Forces Survey, Personnel and Readiness will not be effectively positioned to fulfill its responsibility as the Principal Staff Advisor to the Secretary of Defense for morale, welfare, and quality-of-life matters for service members, including those living in barracks.

Military Services Generally Do Not Evaluate the Effects of Barracks Conditions on Reenlistment

No military service has fulfilled DOD requirements to periodically evaluate the effects of barracks conditions on service members' reenlistment decisions. As noted above, the DOD Housing Manual requires the services to periodically evaluate housing-related questions on service-wide or installation-specific surveys, including to assess the significance of housing in service members' decisions to enlist or reenlist. Housing is defined under this manual to include barracks.

The Navy and Marine Corps survey barracks residents for quality-of-life effects through tenant satisfaction surveys, as described above. However, these surveys do not ask about the effects of barracks conditions on reenlistment. The 2020 OSD memorandum described above sets required questions for the tenant satisfaction surveys, but does not include questions on reenlistment. Officials at an Air Force installation told us barracks residents consistently provide feedback about training barracks through end-of-course surveys.⁵⁸ However, these surveys do not always address reenlistment. Further, officials told us results are not routinely shared with services' housing officials.⁵⁹ By contrast, the one-time Army survey described above asked service members to what extent their decision to reenlist was influenced by their barracks experience.

Discussion Group and Senior-Enlisted Service Member Perspectives

Service members consider leaving the military because they are miserable [in barracks]. They want to control how they live.

- Senior-enlisted service member

You might enjoy your job, but poor barracks conditions are enough to make you not want to reenlist.

-Barracks resident

If you can't expect leadership to fix immediate housing issues, why stay [in the military]?

-Barracks resident

Source: GAO discussion groups and interviews | GAO-23-105797

Poor living conditions can have significant effects on reenlistment. For example, service officials across all military services told us barracks conditions can affect service members' willingness to reenlist. Further, in eight of 12 discussion groups, a majority of service members said that barracks living conditions are an important factor when considering reenlistment. Similarly, the one-time Army survey found that some respondents who did not plan to reenlist reported that their experience living in the barracks contributed to this decision.

The military services have not fulfilled DOD requirements to periodically evaluate the effects of barracks conditions on reenlistment because OSD has not updated guidance on the tenant satisfaction survey, or other surveys of service members living in barracks, to require that the military services include questions on effects of barracks conditions on reenlistment decisions. Survey results would be helpful in quantifying readiness effects associated with barracks living conditions, and provide key information to decision makers. For example, officials from two services told us reliable data on any association between housing conditions and service member reenlistment would be helpful to inform resource investment decisions to improve living conditions in barracks and service member retention.

⁵⁸End-of-course surveys are surveys offered to service members upon completion of training courses to document and collect information on service members' experiences in training barracks, according to these officials.

⁵⁹Officials at multiple installations across all services told us they use other methods to collect information regarding effects of barracks living conditions on reenlistment, such as informal discussions or ad-hoc surveys.

DOD Does Not Track or Use Complete or Consistent Information When Making Resource Decisions Related to Barracks

DOD has not tracked complete or reliable information on how much Operation and Maintenance (O&M) or Military Construction (MILCON) it has used to improve barracks conditions or how much would be needed to meet minimum condition standards. Additionally, DOD has not tracked complete or reliable information on how much Military Personnel funding it has used to house service members typically required to live in barracks. Further, the military services vary in their approach to assigning mission scores to barracks, which is one of the pieces of information used when prioritizing barracks improvement projects for funding.

DOD Does Not Track Complete Information on Its Use of Funding to Maintain, Improve, and Construct Barracks

As explained earlier, DOD generally relies primarily on three sources of appropriated funds to maintain and improve barracks facilities, or to house service members typically required to live in barracks—(1) O&M funds to maintain and improve existing barracks, (2) MILCON funds to significantly renovate old barracks or construct new ones, and (3) Military Personnel funds to house service members in private sector housing due to space limitations in the barracks, or other reasons. However, we found that DOD does not have complete information on the full scope of its use of O&M, MILCON, and Military Personnel funding related to barracks housing programs.

O&M. DOD funding to maintain and improve barracks conditions is included in DOD’s annual budget request under the Facility Sustainment, Restoration and Modernization (FSRM) category.⁶⁰ However, DOD and service-level annual budget requests consolidate FSRM funding for all facilities within a single requested amount, making it challenging or impossible to determine the amount of funding specifically designated for barracks. For fiscal year 2024, DOD requested about \$15 billion for FSRM across all active-duty facilities, including barracks.

When we asked the military services to provide information on the amount of FSRM funding obligated for barracks, none was able to provide

⁶⁰Sustainment is the maintenance and repair activities necessary to keep an inventory of facilities in good working order. Restoration is the restoration of a facility to such a condition that it may be used for its designated purpose. Modernization is the alteration or replacement of facilities solely to implement new or higher standards, to accommodate new functions, or to replace building components that typically last more than 50 years (such as the framework or foundation).

us complete data.⁶¹ For example, no military service was able to provide reliable information on the amount of FSRM funding requested or obligated at the installation-level for barracks. According to OSD and service officials, the services prioritize and allocate FSRM funding for more expensive renovation projects—such as renovating bathrooms across a barracks facility—at the headquarters level; installations submit projects for consideration, and the services each determine which projects will receive funding. In contrast, officials told us that military installations are responsible for prioritizing and allocating FSRM funding for less expensive projects—such as replacing broken parts in an air conditioning system.

Only one military service, the Air Force, provided any information on FSRM funding obligated by installations for fiscal years 2012 through 2022, but this information was an estimate. Air Force officials told us installations do not reliably track FSRM obligations at the installation level on barracks. Conversely, the Army, Navy and Marine Corps provided funding information only on FSRM barracks projects funded at the headquarters level, not at the installation level because, according to officials, these services do not track installation FSRM projects.

In addition, the Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps were unable to provide complete information on FSRM funding amounts, because, according to officials, barracks funding is tracked together with other facilities. For example, the Air Force provided the amount obligated for barracks at the headquarters level, and an estimate for the amount obligated at the installation-level, but did not provide the amount it had identified as its total annual requirement for barracks FSRM or the amount it submitted to OSD for the annual budget request. The Navy provided information that identified annual FSRM requirements for barracks, as well as some

⁶¹We requested funding information on FSRM specific to barracks for fiscal years 2012 through 2022. Our request included the amount military services identified annually and submitted to OSD in service budget requests, as well as the amount DOD submitted in the President's budget request, the amount Congress made available to DOD, and the amount obligated. An obligation is a definite commitment that creates a legal liability of the government for the payment of goods and services ordered and received. The military services provided some funding information based on internal service budget materials used to prepare the annual budget request.

related budgetary information.⁶² The Marine Corps provided only identified annual FSRM requirements for barracks, and did not provide the obligated amount.

MILCON. DOD's annual budget request and accompanying service-level documents include information on MILCON amounts requested for specified major barracks construction projects; they do not include information on unspecified minor MILCON barracks projects identified by the services and installations as a MILCON requirement.⁶³ Additionally, based on discussions with military service and installation officials, we found that installations had identified some needed barracks construction projects that were not ultimately identified as requirements to or by that military service.

We requested information on barracks projects funded through MILCON from each of the services for fiscal years 2012 through 2022.⁶⁴ The

⁶²The Navy provided less funding information for barracks sustainment, and more funding information for barracks restoration and modernization based on internal service budget materials used to prepare the President's budget request. For example, the Navy did not provide the amount submitted to OSD for the annual budget requests, submitted in the President's budget request, or the appropriated amounts made available for barracks, or amounts awarded for barracks sustainment. In contrast, the Navy provided information that identified annual requirements, the amount submitted to OSD, and the amount awarded for barracks restoration and modernization. The Navy did not provide the amount submitted in the President's budget request, or the amount appropriated.

⁶³Military construction projects may only be carried out as authorized by law. Generally such authority is provided in the annual Military Construction Authorization Act. Specific projects authorized in law are considered to be major military construction projects. Unspecified minor construction projects may also be carried out under the authority of the Secretary concerned. Unspecified minor military construction projects are those with an approved cost equal to or less than \$6,000,000. Congressional reporting and project approval requirements vary for unspecified minor construction projects based on estimated project cost. For example, an unspecified minor construction project costing more than \$750,000 requires advance approval by the Secretary concerned and, if costing more than \$2,000,000, congressional notification of such approval 14 days prior to the project's start. Finally, unspecified minor military construction projects costing \$2,000,000 or less may be funded with O&M amounts.

⁶⁴The services provided information on MILCON projects for barracks. In addition to identified barracks projects funded through MILCON, we also requested from each military service for fiscal years 2012 to 2022, MILCON amounts for barracks requested in annual budgets, appropriated MILCON amounts made available for barracks, and MILCON amounts obligated for barracks projects. The Army and Marine Corps provided all requested information. The Air Force provided information on MILCON amounts obligated for barracks projects. The Navy provided identified annual requirements, the amount submitted to OSD, and MILCON amounts awarded for barracks.

information service officials provided showed that, in some fiscal years, the military services did not identify barracks MILCON projects to OSD for consideration as part of DOD's annual budget submission. For example, for more than one military service, the data provided by the services listed zero for barracks requirements for multiple fiscal years. Specific major barracks projects did periodically appear in DOD's annual MILCON budget request.⁶⁵ While the services may not have elevated all installation barracks requirements to the OSD level, the information provided by the services identified that amounts were still appropriated to and obligated by the services for barracks projects in some of those years.

Officials at five of 10 installations we visited told us they have more barracks projects in need of funding than they include in their requirements submissions, or that barracks MILCON projects do not compete well against other needed MILCON projects when submitted for inclusion as part of the annual budget request. For example, officials at multiple installations told us that when putting together a MILCON submission, they have to weigh competing priorities, and do not expect barracks projects to be competitive for funding. This serves as a disincentive to submit barracks projects, according to officials. For example, at one Army installation, officials told us they need barracks MILCON projects to improve quality of life for service members, but would not submit these projects for consideration because the Army only approves barracks projects connected to a new mission, such as when a new tenant arrives at the installation and requires housing for enlisted service members.

Senior officials from all services told us installations are to submit all MILCON needs to their relevant service headquarters for consideration, regardless of whether they expect proposed projects to receive funding. Two services have established this as a requirement in guidance or developed informal processes to encourage installations to submit all required barracks projects. For example, Army guidance indicates that commands should submit MILCON projects for new barracks when it would not be cost effective to renovate existing barracks, when MILCON funding is needed to address insufficient space in barracks, or to meet

⁶⁵For example, DOD's fiscal year 2024 MILCON budget request included \$469.3 million for seven specific barracks projects, \$36.7 million lower than DOD's fiscal year 2023 MILCON request for six barracks projects.

emerging requirements.⁶⁶ According to Air Force officials, the Air Force identifies MILCON needs for all its barracks every 4 years as a part of recurring analysis of barracks funding requirements overall. The officials told us they encourage installations to submit all of their proposed barracks projects for consideration as part of this quadrennial exercise.⁶⁷

However, officials at some installations we visited noted that they have had difficulty receiving funding for barracks, even when requested over multiple fiscal years. In one case, officials at one Navy installation told us they requested funding for new barracks every year for 10 years, due to insufficient bed spaces, but did not succeed in obtaining it. As a result, that installation has consistently housed about 500 service members on aircraft carriers or berthing barges, according to officials.⁶⁸ See figure 16.

Figure 16: Aircraft Carrier and Berthing Barge Used to House Service Members at Navy Installation



Source: GAO. | GAO-23-105797

Military Personnel. Some service members who should live in barracks instead receive BAH to live in private sector housing due to space

⁶⁶Department of the Army, *Facility Investment Guidance (FIG) Annual Update for Program Objective Memorandum (POM) 24-28* (Aug. 4, 2021).

⁶⁷Air Force officials told us the Air Force identifies MILCON requirements through its Dormitory Master Plan. The Dormitory Master Plan is an investment planning tool that identifies sustainment, restoration and modernization, and replacement needs for Air Force barracks. According to officials, identified needs are based on barracks conditions and projected personnel requirements.

⁶⁸Service members living on the aircraft carrier we toured told us life is difficult on the ship because they have very limited space, there is limited connectivity via phone or internet, and laundry machines regularly break. They also said they would prefer to live off the ship, either in barracks on the installation or in off-base housing in the community.

limitations in the barracks or other reasons. In addition to space limitations, BAH may be provided to service members to reside in private sector housing, such as apartments, if their barracks housing is closed due to needed repairs or renovations. For example, officials at one installation we visited told us that it cost about \$4 million in fiscal year 2022 to provide BAH for service members removed from barracks that became uninhabitable.

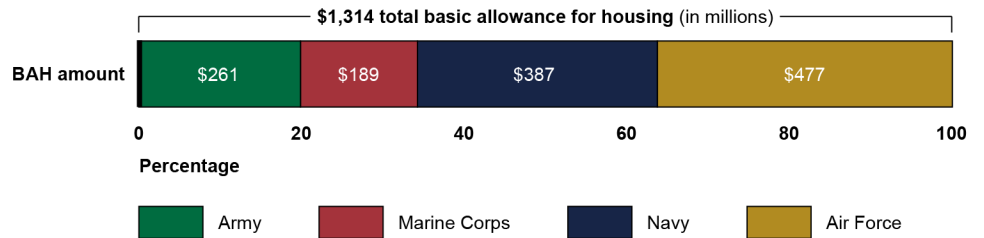
Funding for BAH is supported by military personnel appropriations. DOD's Military Personnel budget request includes information about BAH requested for officers and enlisted service members. However, these materials do not specify the amount of BAH needed to house unaccompanied service members who would otherwise be living in barracks. According to our analysis of DOD data, the military services spent about \$1.3 billion on BAH in fiscal year 2022 to house service members typically required to live in barracks.⁶⁹

The military services varied in the amount spent on BAH for service members who are generally required to live in barracks.⁷⁰ For example, in fiscal year 2022, the Air Force and Navy spent the most on BAH for these service members—about \$477 million and \$387 million, respectively. See figure 17.

⁶⁹In addition to the Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) that the services provide to house service members when barracks space is not available, the services provide a partial BAH to unaccompanied service members living in government quarters. Rates of partial BAH vary by rank. For example, based on current non-locality BAH rates, an E-1 would receive \$6.90 a month, and an E-4 would receive \$8.10. OSD officials told us partial BAH rates were originally intended as a pay increase for service members living in barracks. According to our analysis of DOD data, in fiscal year 2022, we found that the services spent about \$17.8 million on partial BAH for service members living in barracks who were required to do so.

⁷⁰Service members living in government-owned barracks receive partial BAH; service members with ranks that would require them to live in barracks—based on rank and years of service—are provided full BAH to pay for private sector housing when barracks space is unavailable. Our analysis showed that the military services vary in how much they spend on both full and partial BAH amounts for service members required to live in barracks based on their rank and years of service.

Figure 17: Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) Paid to Service Members Typically Required to Live in Barracks, Fiscal Year 2022



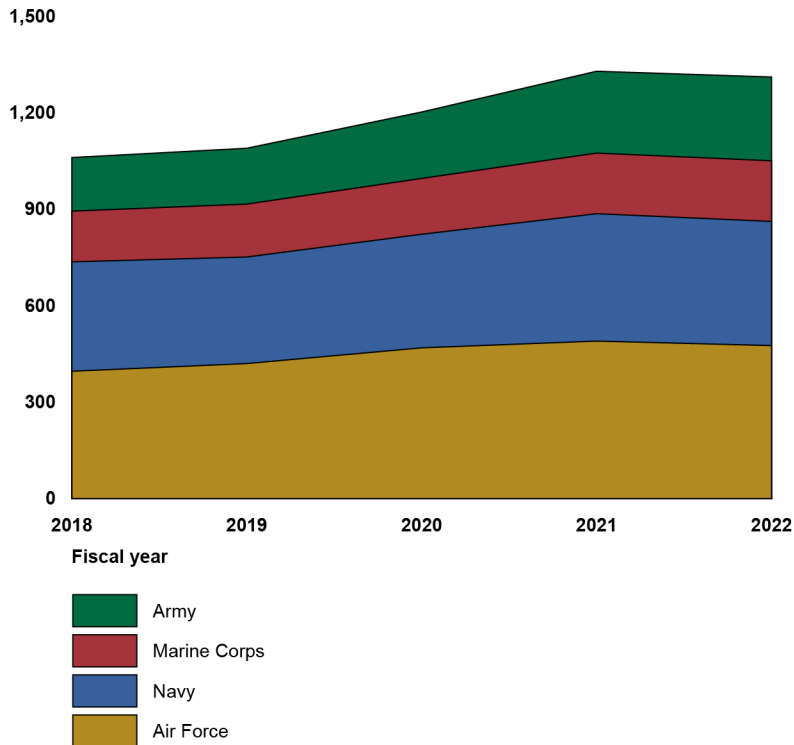
Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense data. | GAO-23-105797

Note: These amounts include both full BAH amounts used to house service members when barracks space is not available as well as partial BAH amounts paid to service members living in government-owned barracks. Calculations in this figure are based on the categories of service members in each service that are typically required to live in barracks, based on dependency status, rank, and, where applicable, years of service. Navy E-4s with 4 or more years of service may be required to live in barracks depending on availability of adequate barracks housing on Navy installations; accordingly, for purposes of our analysis, we included all unaccompanied Navy E-4s.

In addition, the total amount of BAH paid to service members required to live in barracks has increased from fiscal year 2018 through 2022. See figure 18.

Figure 18: Total Amount of Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) Paid to Service Members Typically Required to Live in Barracks, Fiscal Years 2018—2022, in Millions

Dollars (in millions)



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense data. | GAO-23-105797

Note: These amounts include both full BAH amounts used to house service members when barracks space is not available, as well as partial BAH amounts paid to service members living in government owned barracks. Amounts have been adjusted to account for inflation. Calculations in this figure are based on the categories of service members in each service that are typically required to live in barracks, based on dependency status, rank, and, where applicable, years of service. Navy E-4s with 4 or more years of service may be required to live in barracks depending on availability of adequate barracks housing on Navy installations; accordingly, for purposes of our analysis, we included all unaccompanied Navy E-4s.

OSD officials told us they review service budget materials submitted as a part of the annual planning, programming and budget process for DOD housing programs, including barracks, but they do not have sufficient information and data to know whether these materials reflect complete funding information or whether the services' budget requests for barracks-related funding fully and accurately reflect needs. They also stated that the department is working toward improved data analytics, but that it is difficult to clearly identify funding needed, requested, and spent for barracks. For example, officials identified challenges related to

implementation of a recent statutory requirement for the secretaries of the military departments to reserve certain appropriated amounts to carry out projects to improve military barracks.⁷¹ Comptroller and service officials told us it has been challenging to implement this requirement because of limitations in budgeting processes and a lack of reliable information on barracks funding.

DOD's *Financial Management Regulation* calls for federal managers to produce budgets at a detailed level that will improve accuracy, insight, and increased transparency of an agency's expenditures.⁷² Additionally, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* call for management to provide decision makers with the necessary quality information for making decisions.⁷³ However, DOD's *Financial Management Regulation*, which governs the format for development and presentation of budget materials, does not require that O&M funding requested for barracks maintenance be specifically identified as such. Additionally, DOD does not have comprehensive and ready visibility into all MILCON amounts that installations identify as necessary for barracks improvement.

Also, DOD's *Financial Management Regulation*, does not require Military Personnel funding for BAH—provided to service members for off-base housing who would otherwise live in the barracks—to be specifically identified. This lack of visibility into the full picture of barracks budgetary requirements limits DOD's ability to identify and clearly report such information to agency and congressional decision makers in a complete and comprehensive manner. For example, OSD officials told us that it is challenging to track funding for barracks housing programs, and that the department was considering various methods to improve tracking, such

⁷¹Specifically, section 2814 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022 provided that, of the total amount authorized to be appropriated by the National Defense Authorization Act for each of fiscal years 2022 through 2026 for facilities sustainment, restoration, and modernization activities of a military department, the Secretary of that military department must reserve an amount equal to 5 percent of the estimated replacement cost of the total inventory of unaccompanied housing under their jurisdiction, for the purpose of carrying out projects for the improvement of military unaccompanied housing. The provision defined "military unaccompanied housing" as military housing intended to be occupied by service members serving on a tour of duty unaccompanied by dependents. Pub. L. No. 117-81, § 2814 (2021).

⁷²DOD 7000.14-R, *Financial Management Regulation*, vol. 4, chap. 19 (Oct. 2020).

⁷³GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: September 10, 2014).

as regular data calls to the military services or including separate lines of accounting for barracks in relevant appropriation accounts.

In contrast, budget materials for government-owned and privatized family housing include information on new construction, operation, and maintenance of these facilities as separate and clearly delineated categories. Although budget materials do not identify the amount of BAH paid to private housing companies, OSD tracks income that private housing companies receive from rent payments on a quarterly basis.⁷⁴ Officials from all military services told us funding information for family housing is easy to track and review because there is a separate appropriation account specific to military family housing.

In addition, although senior officials from all services told us that installations are to submit all military construction needs to their relevant service headquarters for consideration, regardless of whether they expect projects to receive funding, the services have not established a method to ensure that they have visibility into all barracks MILCON requirements identified at the installation level, particularly funding requirements related to improving barracks living conditions that support quality of life and readiness. For example, the services could compile a complete list of all identified barracks MILCON requirements and provide those annually to Congress. Notably, there have been congressional concerns raised about the service budget submissions not including some funding requirements pertaining to quality-of-life infrastructure, including barracks. Developing and implementing a method for the military services to ensure they have timely and detailed information regarding barracks MILCON requirements would allow both service and OSD leadership to appropriately weigh and prioritize MILCON requirements and funding ultimately requested for barracks.

Similarly, although DOD provides more detailed funding information for military family housing, it has not developed a method to identify and report complete funding information for barracks in a combined manner, particularly funding requirements and expenditures related to improving barracks conditions. Without a means to identify the requirements and expenditures needed to address barracks conditions through O&M, MILCON, and Military Personnel, OSD and the services may be hindered in their ability to ensure that barracks are sufficiently funded, and

⁷⁴Income for privatized housing projects includes rent paid through BAH, as well as other sources of rental income from retirees, civilians and other residents of privatized housing who are not currently serving on active duty in the military.

Congress will not have visibility into the full scope of barracks requirements when making annual funding decisions. Further, it will be challenging for DOD to weigh different options for funding barracks needs. For example, DOD will not have sufficient information needed to consider whether O&M, MILCON, or Military Personnel—and specifically BAH—may be a more effective choice to meet housing needs for a given fiscal year.

Military Services Vary in Approach to Assigning Mission Scores Used in Prioritizing Barracks Improvement Projects

We identified variations in the approach the services use to determine mission scores—a key element the services consider when prioritizing barracks improvement projects for funding. When the services decide how much funding to request and obligate for barracks improvement projects, they rely in part on two pieces of information—the facility’s condition score and the facility’s mission score. As explained earlier, the facility’s condition score—intended to reflect the physical condition of a facility based on assessments of building systems such as electrical, plumbing and foundation—may not provide reliable information about living conditions in the barracks. Similarly, facility mission scores—either a number or category indicating the risk to mission should the barracks facility fail—may not be a reliable data point when determining funding needed for barracks improvements.

Current methods for determining mission scores rely, in part, on the subjective judgment of each service’s leaders, such as installation commanders. The Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force use a numerical scale—from 0 to 100—to assign mission scores. The higher the score, the more mission critical the facility is deemed to be. The Army does not use numerical mission scores, instead using mission and function categories.

Each of these services’ methods for calculating the scores varies somewhat, as detailed below.

- According to officials, the Marine Corps uses category codes such as housing and community to assign a baseline numerical mission score. Points are then added to the score based on facility use and commander input regarding how the facility affects unit mission,

according to officials.⁷⁵ These officials said the process is new and not yet incorporated into formal service guidance.

- The Navy previously determined mission scores based primarily on surveys of installation personnel, such as unit commanders, but is now transitioning to a process that will use both facility category codes and unit commander input, according to officials.
- Prior to 2018, the Air Force determined mission scores based primarily on facility category codes, such as housing and community, according to officials. Since then, the Air Force has determined mission scores based only on input from senior military leaders, such as wing commanders, provided via a standard survey. However, Air Force officials also told us they plan to stop using mission scores to inform funding decisions. Instead, they will rely solely on whether senior military leaders rank specific facility improvement projects as their first or second priorities during annual budgetary processes.
- The Army determines a facility's mission score based on mission categories—referred to as readiness drivers—associated with that facility, and does not assign a numerical score, according to officials. Among other things, facilities in the highest mission category support a unit's operational plans, while those in the lowest category indirectly support quality of life.⁷⁶ Like the other services, the Army relies, in part, on senior leaders' judgment to determine mission category. Specifically, Army officials told us that Army Commands, such as Army Material Command, determine the appropriate category of their facilities in coordination with military leaders at the installation level.⁷⁷ In addition, the Army assigns a functional rating (good, adequate, poor, and failure) for each barracks facility, which is meant to indicate the ability of the barracks to meet mission requirements. Army officials told us that installation officials, such as housing officials or barracks managers, determine functional ratings using a checklist and their

⁷⁵DOD groups facilities into nine broad classes (operation and training, maintenance and production, research, development, test and evaluation, supply, hospital and medical, administrative, housing and community, utility and ground improvements, and land). Each class has subgroup category codes that identify the type and purpose of the facility.

⁷⁶Under Army guidance, barracks could fall under the highest category, because these facilities house service members, the second category, because barracks are facilities required to support the primary mission, or the third, and lowest category, because barracks affect service member quality of life.

⁷⁷Army officials told us the Army plans to adopt a process for determining numerical mission scores at some point in the future, similar to the processes other services use.

own professional judgment. Checklists include elements such as signage, gutters and lighting, among others.

We found that barracks mission scores vary significantly across each of the services. For example, on average, Air Force barracks have a mission score of about 79.⁷⁸ Marine Corps barracks, however, generally have mission scores below 30, according to service officials. Navy officials told us almost half of barracks have mission scores between 60 and 70, though Navy's new process may lower most barracks mission scores. Further, Navy officials told us very few barracks should have mission scores above 80. Army officials said they were unsure of the mission category assigned to barracks. During site visits, we observed barracks with the same assigned mission, but significantly different mission scores. For example, at two different installations, we observed training barracks used to support the same mission—housing recruits during basic training. The mission score for the recruit barracks at one of the installations was 28, according to officials, but at the other installation, it was 100. Officials at both installations told us these barracks were critical to supporting the mission, and that poor conditions have immediate effects on their ability to train service members. For example, officials told us they lose essential training time when the air conditioning breaks or requires repair because they have to relocate hundreds of service members.

This variation in mission scores likely reflects widely divergent perspectives of the senior leaders responsible for setting the scores. Through interviews, we found that senior leaders' perspectives on the importance of barracks living conditions vary based on their professional judgment and experiences. For example, one installation commander we met with told us barracks are a top priority when making funding decisions, in part because he lived in barracks early in his career and personally understands effects of poor living conditions on readiness. Other installation commanders told us they prioritize mission-essential facilities, such as airfields and hospitals.

⁷⁸Air Force basic training barracks had an average mission score of 98, while other training barracks had an average score of 80, and permanent party barracks had an average score of 67.

Discussion Group Perspectives

It's unfair that there's such a difference in barracks not only across bases but within a single base.

The training barracks [on base] are better maintained than ours. It isn't fair that they are there for a short time in better condition when we have to live permanently in worse conditions.

- Barracks residents

Source: GAO discussion groups | GAO-23-105797

In all 12 discussion groups, service members told us policies related to living in the barracks are unfair, including that service members at the same installation live in barracks that vary in condition and amenities.

DOD's 2018 *Military Compensation Background Papers* state that military compensation should be based on certain underlying principles, including equity and fairness. It also states that few things are more important for morale than that service members believe they are being treated as fairly as possible, and few things undermine morale more than a sense of unfair treatment.⁷⁹

When we asked OSD officials about the significant variation we observed in mission scores, they told us inconsistent barracks mission scores across services is not a problem because each service's mission needs are different. As a result, they have not taken steps that would ensure more consistency across the services in setting mission scores. However, when the same type of facility with the same purpose (e.g., a training barracks housing recruits during basic training) is highly prioritized for funding in one service, and not in another, DOD risks creating noticeable discrepancies in how junior-enlisted service members are housed across different installations and services. Unless OSD takes steps—such as examining how the services develop and use mission scores for barracks, and providing guidance to the military services—to increase consistency in how the services determine mission scores to the maximum extent practicable, the services may not prioritize barracks for improvements in a way that upholds equity and fairness.

⁷⁹DOD, Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, *Military Compensation Background Papers: Compensation Elements and Related Manpower Cost Items Their Purposes and Legislative Backgrounds*, 8th ed. (July 2018). This publication states that any military compensation system should be based on certain underlying principles and that compensation should be designed to foster and maintain the concept of the profession of arms as a dignified, respected, sought after, and honorable career. The emotional and spiritual satisfactions gained from the dedicated performance of uniformed service should be coupled with compensation sufficient for an individual member to maintain a standard of living commensurate with the carrying out of responsibilities that directly affect the security of the nation.

Military Services Have Not Reevaluated Policies Related to Barracks Housing Programs

We identified three areas in which DOD has not recently reevaluated policies that could improve conditions for service members living in barracks. First, DOD has not reevaluated its policies regarding when service members are permitted to receive the BAH, instead of being required to live in barracks—policies that have clear funding and morale implications. Second, we found that the services have not reevaluated current personnel structures for employing barracks managers. Third, we found that the services have not reevaluated the feasibility of privatized barracks, though a congressional committee directed DOD to conduct such an assessment by July 2023.

Military Services Have Not Reevaluated Their Policies Regarding Who Must Live in Barracks and Who Can Receive BAH

Military Service Rank Requirements for Living in Barracks Vary

Service policies have different rank requirements for living in barracks. For example, the Army and Marine Corps require unaccompanied service members in ranks E-1 to E-5 to live in barracks.⁸⁰ The Air Force and Navy require service members in ranks E-1 to E-3, as well as some E-4s depending on several factors, such as years of service or available barracks space on an installation, to live in barracks. Both services allow E-5s to leave barracks. As such, across DOD, unaccompanied, enlisted service members are allowed to live outside of the barracks after being promoted to ranks E-4, E-5, or E-6, depending on the military service. For example:

- In fiscal year 2022, the Army and Marine Corps required respectively, about 18,100 and 7,700 service members with the rank of E-5 to live in barracks.⁸¹ In comparison, no E-5s in the Air Force or Navy are required to live in barracks based on service rank requirements.

⁸⁰Within the U.S., the Army requires unaccompanied service members in ranks E-1 to E-5 to live in barracks. Outside the U.S., the Army requires unaccompanied service members in ranks E-1 to E-6 to live in barracks.

⁸¹These figures refer specifically to unaccompanied E-5s within the U.S. They represent about 26 percent of all Army E-5s and about 35 percent of all Marine Corps E-5s in fiscal year 2022.

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- In the same fiscal year, the Army and Marine Corps required about 53,800 and 18,200 E-4s to live in barracks, respectively. The Navy can require all unaccompanied E-4s to live in barracks, which would be about 33,000 service members in fiscal year 2022. The Air Force required just 65 percent of E-4s to do so—about 20,300 service members.⁸²

Service members in all 12 discussion groups told us policies requiring certain ranks to live in barracks were unfair and should be reconsidered. For example, service members in one discussion group told us service members over 30 years old should not be required to live in barracks, regardless of rank. Service members in another discussion group told us service members required to live in barracks sometimes take drastic action, such as getting married, just to leave the barracks. Service members at one installation said it is unfair that E-5s are considered responsible enough to serve in the role of a non-commissioned officer for their units, but not responsible enough to receive BAH and rent their own apartments. Service members also stated that service members who live in private sector housing or military family housing should not be required to move back into the barracks if they divorce. For example, one service member told us about having to give away a pet after getting divorced, because service policy required a return to the barracks as an unaccompanied service member beneath the rank threshold for BAH.

Service members and military leaders at multiple installations also told us the inconsistency of rank threshold policies between services and across installations is unfair and hurts morale. Unit leaders at a Marine Corps installation told us some installations allow E-5s to receive BAH and leave the barracks while other installations do not.⁸³ Installation commanders at two Marine Corps installations said that service member morale would improve with more consistent rank threshold policies for BAH, and that DOD should work to make these policies more consistent across the services. Service members in our discussion groups were particularly aware of the varying requirements among the services. For example, service members in one discussion group told us it is unfair that Army E-4s are required to live in barracks, while Air Force E-4s, generally, are

⁸²Navy guidance requires all E-4s with fewer than 4 years of service to live in barracks. Guidance also states that E-4s with 4 or more years of service could be required to live in barracks if installations have sufficient space. According to Navy officials, based on this policy, approximately 75 percent of Navy E-4s lived in barracks in fiscal year 2022.

⁸³According to Marine Corps guidance, installation commanders have discretion to approve BAH for certain service members whose ranks would otherwise require them to live in barracks, such as when there is insufficient space in barracks.

not. In addition, some senior-enlisted respondents to the Army survey described above reported that Army E-5s based in the United States should have a choice to receive BAH.

The DOD Housing Manual encourages the military services to establish the rank threshold required to live in the barracks at the lowest reasonable level based, to the extent practical, on a systematic, objective analysis that includes input from unit leaders, in the interest of quality-of-life, changing expectations of junior service members, fiscal prudence, and minimizing barracks requirements.⁸⁴ As previously described, *Military Compensation Background Papers* state that military compensation should be based on certain underlying principles, including equity and fairness, and that few things undermine morale more than a sense of unfair treatment.⁸⁵

However, we found that the military services have not recently reevaluated rank threshold policies through systematic and objective analysis, including input from unit leaders, regarding who is required to live in the barracks. For example, in some cases, the military services last evaluated their policies over 20 years ago, according to officials.

- **Army:** In 2005, the Army issued guidance establishing that, upon promotion to the rank of E-6, Army soldiers living in the United States would be eligible to receive BAH and move out of barracks.⁸⁶
- **Navy:** In 2012, the Navy issued guidance that stated sailors with ranks E-1 through E-3 are required to live in the barracks. Additionally, E-4s with fewer than 4 years of service would be required to live in barracks and E-4s with more than 4 years of service could be required to live in barracks if installations have sufficient space.
- **Marine Corps:** Marine Corps officials told us rank threshold policies requiring service members with ranks E-1 to E-5 to live in barracks have been in place for more than 25 years, but that the Marine Corps is considering allowing some service members with rank E-5 to

⁸⁴DOD Manual 4165.63.

⁸⁵DOD, Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, *Military Compensation Background Papers: Compensation Elements and Related Manpower Cost Items, Their Purposes and Legislative Backgrounds*, 8th ed. (July 2018).

⁸⁶This 2005 decision did not include Army service members stationed overseas, who are still required to live in barracks even at the rank of E-6. Army officials told us that lowering this threshold for service members stationed overseas was under consideration, but that the Army has not yet made a decision to change the current overseas requirement.

receive BAH and live outside of the barracks. However, they said that no comprehensive analysis of the rank threshold requirement has been conducted.

- **Air Force.** Air Force officials said that the Air Force’s existing rank threshold policy, which only requires service members with ranks E-1 to E-3, and E-4s with fewer than 3 years of service, to live in the barracks was originally implemented in the late 1990s, in part to reduce the overall number of service members living in Air Force barracks.

Military service officials whom we interviewed recognized the need to reevaluate rank threshold policies. For example, the Army plans to conduct a comprehensive review of its barracks assignment policy, including an analysis to inform decisions on any potential future changes to the existing rank threshold. Navy officials said their barracks working group is reconsidering who will be required to live in barracks, among other issues, but this effort is relatively new. A Marine Corps installation official provided a draft of limited guidance, language in which reaffirmed existing rank requirements, but also gave discretion to unit commanders to approve up to 600 service members at the rank of E-5 to receive BAH and live outside the barracks. Similarly, the Air Force issued a memorandum in 2018, which reaffirmed existing rank requirements. Air Force officials told us retaining these policies rewards service members at the end of a typical enlistment period of 3 years and encourages them to reenlist by enabling them to live outside of barracks.⁸⁷

However, while some military services have recently issued guidance reaffirming existing rank threshold requirements for living in barracks, these policy statements are not based on recent systematic and objective analysis. While the military services are responsible for determining rank of service members normally required to live in barracks, without consistent, systematic, and objective analyses, the services may not consistently establish the lowest reasonable rank for these requirements. Further, without adjusting service policies in accordance with such analyses—including with input from unit leaders—rank thresholds may be negatively affecting service member morale. Any change to current rank thresholds would have clear funding implications, and analysis weighing the benefits of lowering the rank threshold against costs to DOD will also provide important information to support decision-making.

⁸⁷According to officials, the Air Force also reaffirmed rank requirements in February 2023.

Service Policies on Exceptions to Requirements to Live In Barracks Vary by Service and Installation

Like the rank requirements for living in barracks, the services' policies and processes vary for making exceptions to these requirements and, therefore, for providing BAH to service members.⁸⁸ The DOD Housing Manual states that installation commanders may provide BAH to service members who would otherwise be required to live in barracks for one of two reasons—(1) when there is insufficient space in the barracks and (2) for other reasons as determined by each military service.⁸⁹

Insufficient barracks space. Guidance across all services authorizes installation commanders to provide BAH to service members when barracks space is insufficient and, specifically, when occupancy in barracks exceeds 95 percent across the installation. Officials at all 10 installations we visited told us an occupancy rate above 95 percent is the primary reason they approve BAH for unaccompanied, junior-enlisted service members.

However, service and installation processes vary for deciding which service members receive BAH when barracks space is insufficient. For example, Navy guidance states that when barracks exceed 95 percent occupancy, certain service members with 4 years of service may request BAH.⁹⁰ Air Force guidance states installations are to authorize BAH for service members who request to live in private sector housing based on seniority. Similarly, Army and Marine Corps guidance broadly state that service members in barracks can request to live in private sector housing, but does not clarify which service members should be given first priority should occupancy reach 95 percent. At one Army installation, first sergeants told us if service members arrive on base when the barracks are at capacity, they may receive BAH. Service members at the same installation told us this process was unfair because some are lucky and some unlucky based only on arrival timing. At one Marine Corps

⁸⁸Generally, service members required to live in barracks request to receive BAH through a certificate of non-availability, a document that, if approved by the installation, authorizes service members to receive BAH and live outside of government-owned barracks.

⁸⁹In addition, the DOD Housing Manual states that mandatory assignment to inadequate barracks housing solely to limit payment of a housing allowance is not authorized.

⁹⁰Specifically, the guidance provides that E-4s with more than 4 years of service assigned to sea duty may request to move off base and be eligible to receive BAH once the occupancy rate of on-line available barracks spaces reaches 95 percent for the entire installation. Commander, Naval Installations Command Manual 11103.2, *Unaccompanied Housing Operations Management* (Jan. 23, 2019).

installation, first sergeants told us when barracks space is insufficient, their units reward high performing service members with BAH.

Reasons determined by services. Each of the services has also established other reasons when it is permitted to provide BAH to service members who should be required to live in the barracks, though the number and type of reason vary by service. For example,

- Air Force guidance includes a variety of specific reasons an installation commander may provide BAH other than high occupancy, such as if a service member purchased a mobile home before being assigned to an installation or expects to marry within the next 60 days.
- Navy guidance identifies more limited specific examples of exceptions for which a service member may receive BAH early, such as if barracks space is insufficient for storing service members' government-furnished gear.
- Army guidance provides several reasons, including if service members have purchased a home near an installation prior to notification of assignment to that installation.
- Marine Corps guidance allows for temporary provision of BAH if a service member gets divorced, where their spouse was their sole family member.

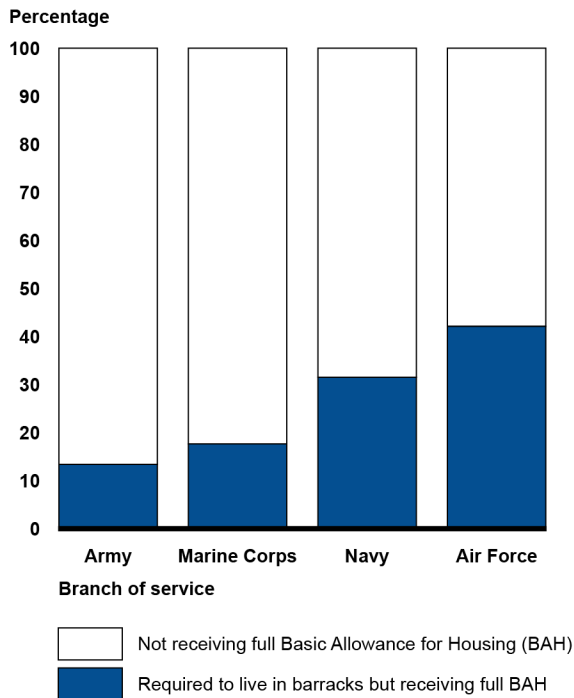
The DOD Housing Manual states that installation commanders have broad authority to decide the best use of resources to provide housing for service members, but service guidance varies in specificity regarding commander discretion. Army, Marine Corps, and Air Force guidance state that installation commanders have discretion to provide BAH if doing so would mitigate undue hardship. Navy guidance does not explicitly authorize this same discretion in the issuance of BAH. Air Force officials told us they do not track reasons for exceptions to rank requirements, but trust in the professional judgment of installation leadership. Similarly, Navy officials told us it is difficult to track how many exceptions installation commanders grant based on their discretion.

During site visits, installation officials and unit leaders across multiple services told us installation commanders may be reluctant to approve an exception and provide BAH if the specific circumstances are not explicitly included as an acceptable reason in service guidance. For example, unit leaders at multiple installations told us installation commanders denied requests for BAH for service members who, they believed, had reasons that were compelling but not included in service guidance, such as to

receive joint custody of a child, care for a sick relative, or because the service member had previously experienced sexual assault while living in barracks. Similarly, at one installation, officials told us they were unsure if they should approve an application for BAH due to sexual harassment in the barracks because the exception was not specifically stated in service guidance.

Our analysis of DOD data demonstrates the extent to which the services' varied approaches to providing exceptions to rank requirements for living in barracks have resulted in substantially different outcomes for service members, depending on their service. We determined that, in fiscal year 2022, there were about 365,000 unaccompanied enlisted service members who, based on their rank, would normally be required to live in barracks. About 86,300 of those service members received BAH to pay for private sector housing instead of living in barracks, with service members in the Air Force most likely to receive an exception, and service members in the Army the least likely. Specifically, we found that about 13 percent of Army service members normally required to live in barracks received BAH, compared to about 42 percent of Air Force service members. See figure 19.

Figure 19: Percent of Service Members Required to Live in Barracks but Receiving BAH) in Fiscal Year 2022, by Service



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense data. | GAO-23-105797

Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government states that management should implement control activities through policies described in appropriate detail to allow management to effectively monitor the control activity. However, DOD guidance does not clearly identify reasons that would be considered appropriate for providing BAH, as an exception, to service members who would normally be required to live in barracks. Specifically, the DOD Housing Manual requires the services to provide BAH when barracks space is insufficient or for other reasons determined by the services, but does not further define which service members should receive BAH when there is limited space, or what factors installation commanders should consider. As a result, service guidance varies, and installation implementation of such guidance may vary further.

Without clear DOD guidance identifying appropriate reasons for providing BAH to service members who would normally be required to live in barracks, such as guidance identifying factors installation commanders should consider when authorizing BAH, installation commanders may

continue to do so inconsistently across services and installations, with adverse effects on morale. Specifically, DOD guidance could more clearly identify reasons for which installation commanders can issue certificates of non-availability to authorize BAH for service members required to live in barracks. In addition, installation commanders may vary in how they weigh the costs to DOD in providing BAH against opportunities to lessen hardships that service members face.

Military Services Have Not Reevaluated Policies Regarding Barracks Manager Position

All military services assign barracks managers to oversee the day-to-day management of the facilities, but these managers, in many cases, are not positioned to perform their duties effectively.⁹¹ However, the military services have not reevaluated their policies defining the personnel structures for the position. Barracks managers' primary responsibilities generally include regularly assessing and inspecting barracks conditions, managing work orders for repairs, communicating with residents regarding repairs, and ensuring that installation maintenance officials conduct needed emergency and preventive maintenance. Barracks managers also serve as liaisons between barracks residents and installation housing maintenance offices. Further, they typically manage other facility processes, such as move-in and move-out processes, furniture replacement, data entry related to current occupancy, and issuing keys to residents.

Personnel structures for barracks managers vary by service, as established in service policy. In some cases, the barracks manager position also varies by installation. Barracks managers may serve in the position full or part time, may be active-duty service members or civilian officials, and receive different amounts and types of training, as detailed below, by service.

- **Army:** According to Army housing officials, barracks managers are generally active-duty service members, such as first sergeants, assigned to the position part time, in addition to their primary job duties. Unit commanders in certain ranks are responsible for appointing barracks managers, and some units have assigned the

⁹¹The military services use different terms for the barracks manager position, such as unaccompanied housing manager, building manager, or airmen dormitory leader. We use the term barracks manager to apply to individuals in any service with day-to-day management responsibility for barracks.

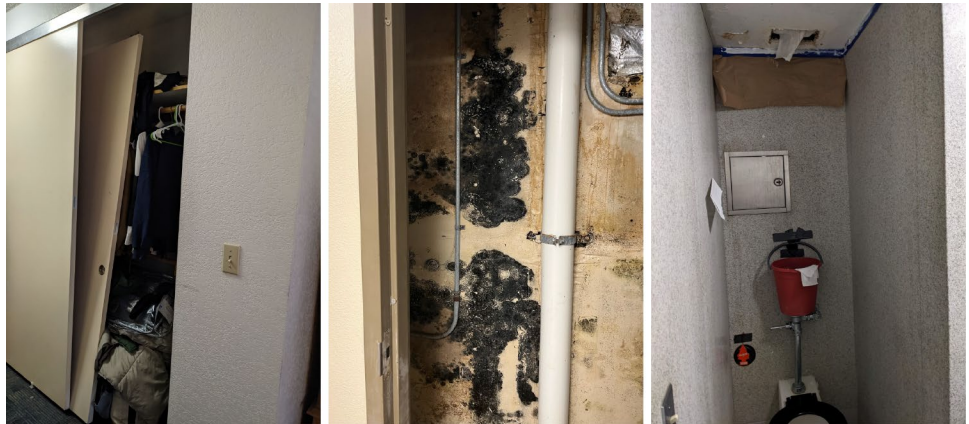
position full time or to service members in more junior ranks, according to officials.⁹²

- **Air Force:** Barracks managers for permanent party barracks are generally active-duty service members assigned to the position full time for 3-year periods. According to officials, active-duty training instructors often manage the training barracks where their trainees live, in addition to primary job responsibilities.
- **Navy:** According to Navy officials, barracks managers for permanent party barracks are generally full-time civilian officials within installation housing offices. Navy training commands, rather than full-time barracks managers, may manage training barracks, depending on the installation.
- **Marine Corps:** Barracks managers are active-duty service members assigned to the position full time for at least a 12-month period, or civilian personnel, according to Marine Corps guidance. However, when unit commanders are responsible for assigning the barracks manager position, officials told us that some units assign the position part time or for periods of time shorter than 12 months.

Barracks managers at installations across all military services told us they do not have enough time to meet performance objectives of the position, especially to conduct sufficient follow-up related to work orders. For example, a full-time barracks manager at one installation told us fulfilling all assigned responsibilities is a challenge due to the high volume of maintenance work orders. During site visits, we observed problems that, according to officials, would require significant time for barracks managers to address. For example, barracks managers at multiple installations told us it had taken or would take at least several months to fix a range of issues they face, such as broken closet doors, mold, and damage from leaking pipes. See figure 20.

⁹²According to Army officials, unit commanders and first sergeants are primarily responsible for service members living areas, in addition to their other duties.

Figure 20: Challenges with Barracks Conditions Requiring Work Order Follow-Up



Broken closet door in barracks room

Mold growing in laundry room utility closet due to water damage

Bucket placed under bathroom pipe leak as a temporary fix

Source: GAO (left and right); Department of Defense (middle). | GAO-23-105797

Barracks managers also told us they sometimes have to take additional time to conduct needed maintenance work themselves. For example, barracks managers at multiple installations told us they have had to organize working days for service members to repaint external or internal walls, replace ceiling tiles, or clean up significant sewage overflow. Further, at installations across two military services, barracks managers told us they are responsible for cleaning and removing broken laundry machines, as well as for installing replacements—a task that can take several hours and can require transportation and assistance from barracks residents. Laundry machines break consistently, and can take months to repair and replace, which affects service member access to laundry facilities, according to officials at multiple installations. See figure 21.

Figure 21: Broken Washing Machines and Dryers at Military Installations



Source: GAO. | GAO-23-105797

During interviews with installation leadership and other discussions, we heard varying perspectives on factors that might contribute to the challenges that barracks managers face.

Part-time barracks manager position. Officials at installations we visited across multiple military services—including barracks managers—told us it is difficult for barracks managers to accomplish mission and performance objectives when serving part time, in accordance with service policy. Multiple barracks managers serving in the position part time told us they can spend only 2 to 3 hours a day on barracks manager responsibilities and sometimes have to work extra hours on nights and weekends to keep up with work order follow-up and required data entry. Further, officials at multiple installations told us additional resources for funding full time barracks manager positions would support improvements to barracks. However, as noted above, even full-time barracks managers reported feeling overwhelmed with their assigned work.

Civilian versus military barracks manager positions. Some installation officials and barracks residents we met with thought that establishing civilian or military barracks manager positions in service policy might improve job performance. For example, in one discussion group, one service member said that civilian barracks managers were effective, while another said that civilian barracks managers were effective only when they had prior active-duty military experience. We heard similarly diverse opinions about the value of civilian versus military barracks managers at

other installations we visited. For example, first sergeants at one installation said that civilian barracks managers were effective because they can respond to maintenance requests more quickly than those on active-duty.

Training procedures. Training is another factor that could affect barracks manager effectiveness. All service policies require or offer training for barracks managers, though the type and amount of training varies by service and installation, according to officials. For example, Navy officials told us the Navy provides barracks manager training courses covering most responsibilities of the barracks manager position, as well as additional training on specific topics, such as managing barracks furnishings or providing customer service. Similarly, Air Force officials said that barracks managers undergo several weeks of formal training when selected for the position, and that training covers topics on facility management, relevant data systems, and mentoring skills.

In contrast, Marine Corps officials told us that, although service guidance requires training for barracks managers, the extent and quality of training varies by installation. At one Marine Corps installation, officials told us service members are often assigned to the barracks manager position without any training. Army officials told us that, although they provide training, training sessions may be under attended and that regular turnover can undermine continuity of barracks management. Officials told us that high turnover of barracks managers, whether active-duty or civilian, can make it more challenging to provide training and build key skills required to accomplish performance objectives of the position.

DOD Directive 1100.4, *Guidance for Manpower Management*, states that personnel requirements are driven by workload and shall be established at the minimum levels necessary to accomplish mission and performance objectives, and that existing policies, procedures, and structures shall be periodically assessed to ensure efficient and effective uses of resources.⁹³ An Army official told us the Army previously conducted a pilot, which entailed hiring full time civilian barracks managers at one installation. According to this official, the Army determined that having full-time civilian barracks managers led to improvements in barracks management. Other Army officials told us a study from 2010 showed that doing so across Army installations would be too costly. In 2013, the Army eliminated civilian barracks manager positions at the pilot installation, and

⁹³DOD Directive 1100.4, *Guidance for Manpower Management* (Feb. 12, 2005).

in 2018 delegated those responsibilities to individual Army units, according to officials.

Since then, none of the services have completed reevaluations of existing policies regarding barracks manager positions to determine—for all barracks types—the minimum level of personnel requirements necessary to accomplish mission and performance objectives, such as assessing day-to-day barracks conditions and working with maintenance officials to ensure repairs are made, according to officials. However, Army and Marine Corps officials told us they were reevaluating policies related to barracks manager positions. According to officials, the Air Force has completed a reevaluation of policies related to barracks manager positions for technical training barracks, but not for basic training barracks. The Navy has not reevaluated policies for barracks manager positions because existing policies establishing a civilian barracks management workforce are sufficient, according to officials. However, as noted above, training commands rather than civilian barracks managers may manage Navy training barracks, depending on the installation.

Without assessing questions, such as how many full-time or part-time barracks managers are needed to manage barracks facilities, whether they should be civilian or military, and whether they have sufficient training for the position, the military services will not be able to ensure barracks managers are positioned to accomplish mission and performance objectives in permanent party and training barracks.

Military Departments Are Considering Feasibility of Privatization and Developing a Department-Wide Report

From 1997 to 2011, the services conducted several assessments of the costs and suitability of privatization as a financing method for their housing needs for unaccompanied personnel. In 2014, we reported that because the military services used different methods, such as business-case and life-cycle cost analyses and different assumptions about how repairs and upkeep for housing would be funded, the services reached different conclusions about the potential for cost savings from using either privatization or the traditional government-funded military construction approach.⁹⁴ The Army concluded that privatization was feasible but more costly in most cases, while the Navy found that privatization was feasible in certain locations. The Air Force and Marine Corps concluded that privatization was not desirable for housing unaccompanied personnel. As a result of these analyses, the Army and Navy moved forward with a

⁹⁴GAO, *Military Housing: Information on the Privatization of Unaccompanied Personnel Housing*, [GAO-14-313](#) (Washington, D.C., March 18, 2014).

small number of privatized barracks projects, as previously described. The Air Force and Marine Corps decided not to pursue privatized barracks projects at that time.

According to Army and Navy officials, both military services are considering additional privatized barracks projects. In contrast, Air Force officials stated that although they have concerns about whether privatized barracks would be cost effective at the majority of Air Force installations, OSD has submitted a request to OMB for consultation regarding a proposal for a privatized barracks project at one location. Officials told us that unique market conditions may make privatized housing a successful model for housing unaccompanied service members at certain Air Force installations, such as locations with limited housing supply off base and long commutes. Marine Corps officials told us they are conducting a study to assess the feasibility of privatized barracks at two installations, but have no plans to move forward with privatization.

We visited two installations with privatized barracks, observed living conditions, and met with service members living in privatized barracks. All room configurations in the privatized barracks we visited met or exceeded DOD minimum standards for privacy and configuration and most included private bedrooms and bathrooms, living rooms, and kitchens. See figure 22.

Figure 22: Army and Navy Privatized Barracks at Fort Meade, Maryland and Naval Base San Diego, California



Source: GAO. | GAO-23-105797

In addition, service members living in privatized barracks consistently told us they were satisfied with the condition of their housing, and that this led to quality-of-life improvements. When asked about the condition of their housing, service members in all 12 discussion groups told us policies related to living in barracks are unfair, including that some service members are able to live in high-quality housing, such as privatized barracks or newer government-owned barracks, while others live in poor conditions. For example, service members in one discussion group said that the clear contrast erodes morale.

Officials from OSD and across all military services told us they found the idea of privatizing barracks appealing, but also had questions about the feasibility of doing so. These questions are similar to concerns raised in some prior military service analyses.

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- **Cost effectiveness.** Prior analyses of the feasibility of barracks privatization conducted by the Air Force found that privatization of housing for unaccompanied personnel was suitable only for certain locations and generally not a cost effective alternative to using MILCON funding for building barracks. The Marine Corps analysis of a pilot project estimated privatization to be more expensive than a new MILCON project.⁹⁵ Housing more service members in privatized housing rather than government-owned barracks would increase spending on BAH because service members required to live in barracks are generally not eligible for BAH. Past service cost analyses on the feasibility of privatized barracks weighed increases in BAH spending against potential decreases in maintenance and construction of government-owned barracks.
 - **Mandatory assignment and effects on OMB scoring.** Each privatization project that DOD enters into must be scored for budget purposes. Scoring seeks to determine the cost that should be recognized and recorded as a DOD obligation at the time the project agreements are finalized. We reported in 2014 that OMB scoring rules in place at the time required that mandatory assignment to a barracks be treated as an occupancy guarantee, which would have the effect of committing the government to a large long-term expenditure upon initiating a privatized barracks project.⁹⁶ As previously described in this report, unaccompanied junior-enlisted service members are generally required by service policy to live in barracks until they reach a certain pay threshold, and as we reported in 2014, at least one service considered mandatory assignment to barracks for junior members essential to unit cohesion and unit integrity. Based at least partially on this factor, the Marine Corps decided at the time that

⁹⁵In 2008, the Marine Corps conducted a feasibility analysis including an examination of the cash contributions required from the Navy, a participation test for the 336-bed project, and a life-cycle cost analysis. The feasibility analysis concluded that privatization of housing for unaccompanied personnel would be 55 percent more expensive than building new quarters using military construction funds.

⁹⁶[GAO-14-313](#).

privatized barracks would not meet its needs. Marine Corps officials indicated to us that this was still a valid concern.⁹⁷

- **Complications due to deployments.** We reported in 2014 that unaccompanied service members living in privatized barracks vacate their barracks room and do not receive BAH when deployed, unless they have a lease requiring BAH payments to continue. Therefore, we reported that frequent or prolonged deployments can reduce the occupancy rates of privatized housing.⁹⁸ Since privatized housing companies receive most of their revenue via BAH payments from residents, occupancy rates are a key indicator of a housing project's financial viability. OSD and service officials told us that relying solely or primarily on unaccompanied service members could negatively affect the financial viability of a privatized housing project, should they be deployed and their BAH payments stopped.
- **Possible negative effects on unit cohesion.** Prior Air Force analyses found that privatization could result in negative effects on unit integrity for airmen, as well as difficulties enforcing discipline among tenants and conducting barracks inspections. We reported in 2014 that a prior Air Force Chief of Staff stated that residing in on base barracks ensures junior-enlisted service members acclimate to the Air Force, build esprit de corps with members of their unit, and have access to base services, such as medical, fitness, recreation, commissary, and exchange facilities. Similarly, a 2009 Marine Corps summary on the subject of barracks privatization noted that marines are assigned to barracks with others from their unit, which promotes unit integrity and unit cohesion.

In an effort to improve living conditions, a congressional committee has encouraged DOD to look for innovative ways to improve barracks, including privatization. Specifically, the House report accompanying a bill for the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 included a

⁹⁷In 2014, we reported that privatized barracks projects do not provide an occupancy guarantee because no service member is required to live in privatized barracks. For example, sailors living in privatized Navy barracks have chosen to live there rather than staying on ships in port. Service members living in Army privatized projects have chosen to live there rather than other private sector housing as Army projects are intended for senior-enlisted service members who would otherwise be receiving BAH or junior-enlisted service members receiving BAH due to space issues in government-owned barracks.

⁹⁸Accompanied service members, such as those with a spouse or children, continue to receive BAH during deployments—and therefore continue to provide a source of rental income to private housing companies—because their dependents continue to live in privatized housing during that time.

provision directing the Secretary of Defense to provide a report to the House Armed Services Committee on the feasibility of privatizing barracks across all military services by July 2023.⁹⁹ The provision includes specific types of information and analysis to be included such as location-specific factors, market demand and operational considerations that would affect the viability of privatized barracks, a business case analysis, and changes in DOD and service policies needed to facilitate privatization, among others. According to officials, DOD did not provide this report to Congress by July 2023, and officials were not able to provide an updated timeframe for when they would do so.

Prior efforts to evaluate the feasibility of privatizing barracks did not require a comprehensive, department-wide assessment sufficient for decision-making. Instead, each service conducted assessments differently, resulting in inconsistent information and conclusions, and therefore actions, leading to morale problems among service members who questioned why some had the opportunity to live in privatized barracks, and others did not. By directing DOD to provide a comprehensive, department-wide report on barracks privatization, congressional recipients will have better information across the services on privatization feasibility.

OSD Does Not Conduct Sufficient Oversight of Barracks Housing Programs or Facilitate Collaboration

OSD Does Not Conduct Sufficient Oversight of Government-Owned Barracks

OSD does not provide sufficient oversight of housing programs for barracks, such as through appropriate DOD guidance or direction to the military services on tracking, assessing, and remediating deficiencies in

⁹⁹H.R. Rep. No. 117-397, at 377 (2022).

barracks living conditions.¹⁰⁰ Specifically, OSD does not have a structure in place to conduct sufficient oversight of barracks, such as monitoring DOD's government-owned barracks inventory, substandard barracks, budget information, and effects of housing condition on service members.

- **Barracks housing inventory.** When we asked OSD for data on the number of barracks facilities by service and the number of service members these facilities house, OSD officials said they were unable to provide such information, and we should request it from the services. Quarterly reviews conducted by OSD for privatized housing, by contrast, track the total number of homes for military families at each military installation, as well as the number of homes occupied by military families.
- **Substandard barracks.** According to OSD officials, they do not monitor the number of substandard barracks across services, as they do not have a role in military service waivers of DOD minimum standards for barracks. These officials also said that OSD could address any challenges related to waivers or substandard barracks, during their annual programmatic review for barracks, but that they were not aware of any challenges. In contrast, OSD's quarterly reviews for privatized housing monitor the number of homes unavailable for occupancy.
- **Budget information.** We found that annual programmatic reviews of barracks include limited and incomplete budget information. For example, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Housing reviews budget information on MILCON funding for barracks and a portion of O&M barracks funding, but does not review budget information related to BAH used to house service members who would be living in barracks if not for condition or space issues. Conversely, for privatized housing, quarterly programmatic reviews monitor a variety of budget information and financial metrics intended to support DOD decision-making. These include assessments of financial risks to privatized projects related to low occupancy and changes to BAH rates, among others.

¹⁰⁰The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Energy, Installations and Environment is designated as the Chief Housing Officer for government-owned and privatized military housing. Specifically, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 establishes the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Energy, Installations and Environment as the Chief Housing Officer responsible for overseeing military barracks. According to DOD documents, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Housing supports the Chief Housing Officer in all statutorily defined duties.

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- **Effects on service members.** We found that OSD’s annual programmatic review for barracks includes limited and incomplete information on the effects of barracks conditions on service members. For example, the services are to provide information to OSD on how they measure tenant satisfaction for barracks residents, such as whether they use the tenant satisfaction survey described previously or other methods, but OSD has not directed them to provide robust information on the results of these assessments. In contrast, one of the four quarterly programmatic reviews for privatized housing focuses in detail on the results of the tenant satisfaction surveys, as well as plans to remediate identified challenges.

OSD has a structure in place to conduct limited oversight of government-owned barracks through its annual programmatic review, though the same office conducts more in-depth quarterly reviews for privatized housing, as described below. Service housing officials we interviewed drew a similar comparison between the level of oversight OSD conducts on privatized housing versus government-owned barracks. For example, officials from one service told us OSD does not monitor service efforts to meet goals related to barracks conditions, and that additional monitoring could result in improvements. Officials from another service said that in the absence of consistent OSD oversight of barracks, improvements to barracks conditions depend on whether service leadership make barracks a priority.

The DOD Housing Manual and other DOD guidance establish an oversight structure that gives officials within OSD responsibility for creating and standardizing policies and processes regarding privatized housing, but guidance has not established similar oversight for government-owned barracks.¹⁰¹ For example, regarding privatized housing oversight, the DOD Housing Manual states that the departments are to provide semiannual updates to the Chief Housing Officer on project monitoring and performance of private housing companies, among other topics. Beyond the housing manual, additional OSD guidance provides more specific direction to the services on information required to support quarterly programmatic reviews for privatized housing. There is no similar guidance in the DOD Housing Manual outlining oversight roles and

¹⁰¹ See, e.g., DOD Manual 4165.63; Assistant Secretary of Defense for Sustainment Memorandum, *Military Housing Privatization Initiative—Approval and Notifications Policy* (Jan. 15, 2021); DOD, *Instructions to the Military Departments for Quarterly Military Housing Privatization Initiative Programmatic Reviews* (effective date Jan. 15, 2021).

responsibilities for relevant OSD offices or related to required programmatic reviews on barracks.

Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government state that responsibilities of an oversight body include overseeing the entity's operations and where appropriate, making oversight decisions so that the entity achieves its objectives. Further, the entity should determine an oversight structure to fulfill responsibilities set forth by applicable laws and regulations, relevant government guidance, and feedback from key stakeholders.

OSD officials acknowledged that they do not conduct as much oversight of barracks as of privatized military housing, and that their annual reviews of barracks are less robust than quarterly reviews for privatized housing. They stated that due to limited staffing resources and congressional focus on privatized housing in recent years, they have not been as focused on strengthening oversight of barracks as they have privatized family housing. The Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Housing was in the process of hiring additional staff, according to officials. OSD officials also told us the military services have the authority to design and manage barracks housing programs as they see fit and that barracks are viewed as the purview of the military services. However, decades long challenges with barracks conditions have persisted under the military services' management, as described above. Without increased OSD oversight, including establishment of an oversight structure designed to more comprehensively establish and fulfill responsibilities for oversight of barracks housing programs, DOD's ability to identify and address long-standing challenges in barracks conditions across the military services' housing programs will be limited.

OSD Has Not Facilitated Collaboration among Military Services to Jointly Improve Barracks Conditions

OSD has not facilitated collaboration across military services, such as by establishing a joint strategy for the services to coordinate, collaborate, and share information on improving barracks conditions. OSD officials said they have monthly meetings with senior service housing officials on military housing overall, but these meetings generally focus on privatized family housing. According to OSD officials, they sometimes discuss issues that are relevant to barracks, such as challenges related to mold across all types of military housing.

The DOD Housing Manual requires the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Energy, Installations, and Environment, to communicate and coordinate with the military departments through regular meetings. It establishes specific meetings for coordination on housing, including a

Housing Policy Panel to be held periodically with military service housing directors to discuss housing policy, annual budgets, and global housing issues. Military service officials told us they were unaware of any meetings of the Housing Policy Panel. According to OSD officials, the Housing Policy Panel no longer meets, in part because of limited staffing resources.

Officials from multiple military services told us collaboration across the department on improving barracks conditions is informal and inconsistent. For example, housing officials from two services said they regularly meet with counterparts from OSD and the other services, but that these meetings focus primarily on privatized housing rather than barracks. According to housing officials from one service, there used to be a government-owned barracks working group where officials from all services met quarterly, but this group no longer meets because the topics covered by the group became too broad to sustain regular meetings. Officials from another service told us maintaining regular, joint meetings across all services has been difficult, but discussing and learning about shared challenges and improvement strategies would be helpful.

As described throughout this report, the military services face common challenges related to barracks conditions. However, the services have been pursuing separate, individual strategies to improve barracks, without the benefits of collaboration through establishment of joint strategies.

- **Air Force and Marine Corps.** The Air Force and Marine Corps have separately pursued maintenance, renovation, and new construction of barracks—to the extent that funding is available—as their primary strategies for improving barracks conditions.¹⁰² Air Force officials told us they were aware that the Air Force would need to make significant investments to improve barracks conditions through these conventional strategies, and that such funding is not always available. According to officials, neither military service was considering larger changes to its barracks housing programs, such as privatization or changes to rank threshold requirements, as described above.
- **Army and Navy.** The Army and the Navy have separately pursued a variety of strategies through focused working groups. These working groups have considered strategies tailored to individual military

¹⁰²Department of the Air Force Report to Congressional Committees, *Improving Budgeting for Barracks and Dormitories in Failing Conditions* (March 2022); Department of the Navy Report to Congress, *Improving Budgeting for Barracks and Dormitories in Failing Conditions* (December 2022).

installations, such as privatization, where appropriate, and lowering the rank threshold requirements. They have also considered service-wide improvements, such as improving the quality of data and information available to decision makers. For example, the Army has worked to improve occupancy data, which are often unreliable because installations manage and input data differently, according to officials. The Navy has worked to consolidate separate data systems with housing information, such as condition scores and occupancy data, into a single dashboard, according to officials. Officials from both services said that higher quality data are important information for decision makers. For example, Navy officials said that consolidated data could help target MILCON and O&M funding to build new barracks on installations with insufficient space, and to improve barracks conditions across the Navy.

Collaboration can be broadly defined as any joint activity that is intended to produce more public value than could be produced when organizations act alone.¹⁰³ Joint activities can range from occasional meetings between managers, such as periodic meetings with service housing directors, to more structured joint teams operating over a longer period. Agencies can enhance and sustain their collaborative efforts by engaging in key practices, such as defining and articulating a common outcome and establishing mutually reinforcing or joint strategies to accomplish a common outcome.

OSD officials stated that limited staffing makes it challenging to collaborate across military services, such as through monthly joint meetings focused on barracks improvement strategies. However, even given additional staff, routine meetings with OSD and service officials to discuss barracks housing may not result in effective collaboration absent a defined common outcome or establishment of joint strategies. For example, officials from one service told us having more inter-service meetings on barracks would not necessarily be helpful. However, officials from another service told us that such collaboration would be beneficial with OSD facilitation. We previously reported that interagency meetings without a clearly defined purpose and establishment of joint strategies may not be productive.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³GAO, *Government Performance Management: Leading Practices to Enhance Interagency Collaboration and Address Crosscutting Challenges*, [GAO-23-105520](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 24, 2023).

¹⁰⁴[GAO-23-105520](#).

Although OSD and the services collaborate in a limited way on barracks housing programs, such collaboration does not reflect key practices for effective collaboration, including defining a common purpose or establishing a joint strategy. Officials from OSD and multiple services told us that formalized, regular collaboration would be useful for improving barracks conditions across the military. For example, OSD officials told us they were considering a department-wide housing improvement plan to renovate and replace barracks in poor or failing condition.

Effective collaboration, through which OSD and the services could clearly define a common purpose and establish joint strategies, would help OSD and the services make concrete improvements to barracks living conditions. As the services pursue strategies to improve barracks conditions, increased collaboration would help the department maximize results. Additionally, as described above, the military services are in various stages of consideration or planning related to changing rank threshold requirements and privatization of barracks, but OSD has not facilitated collaboration on these efforts. For example, if the services reevaluate rank threshold requirements and reach different conclusions, inequities described previously could persist. Similarly, the services have structured the barracks manager position differently, but have not discussed their different approaches with one another. Increased collaboration, facilitated by OSD, could help the services make strategic improvements to barracks housing programs to create consistent approaches and outcomes across the services and better support service members' quality of life and readiness.

Conclusions

Military barracks house hundreds of thousands of service members on U.S. military installations globally and all enlisted service members begin their careers living in barracks. Poor living conditions in these facilities affect service members' quality of life and undermine readiness and mission. Improving barracks conditions and addressing the quality-of-life and morale issues associated with poor conditions has multiple facets—including funding, oversight, and collaboration—and addressing these issues will require DOD to take actions in multiple areas. Specifically, we identified challenges with the following: 1) assessing barracks conditions, 2) collecting information on the effects of barracks conditions, 3) tracking and reporting funding spent on barracks, 4) establishing fair policies, and 5) overseeing barracks programs.

We observed barracks in substandard conditions that potentially pose serious health and safety risks and do not meet standards for privacy and configuration. We identified challenges in how the military services

conduct condition assessments of barracks, and how they assess the minimum standards for assignment related to health and safety, and privacy and configuration standards, in barracks. Without updated guidance and actions to address these challenges, the military services will be less able to identify substandard barracks, and service members may continue to live in uninhabitable barracks that pose potentially significant risks to their health and safety.

We also identified challenges associated with collecting information on the effects of barracks conditions on quality of life and readiness. The military services use varying methods to assess the effects of barracks conditions on service members' quality of life. However, their methods do not fully align with DOD requirements for administering the tenant satisfaction survey, and OSD does not have a method for monitoring the morale and welfare aspects of barracks. By addressing these issues, OSD and the services will be more aware of the effects of living conditions in barracks on quality of life and readiness, and will be better positioned to make improvements for the thousands of service members required to live in those facilities.

Although DOD can track its expenditures, the military services have not tracked complete or reliable information on funding they need, or have used, to improve barracks conditions. Specifically, OSD has not established a method for the services to report in a comprehensive, combined manner, complete O&M, MILCON, and Military Personnel funding information specific to barracks, and the services have not ensured that installations provide information on funding requirements for all barracks MILCON projects. We also identified weaknesses in one of the factors the military services use when prioritizing barracks improvement projects—the factor of mission scores—which may not be a reliable data point when determining funding needed for barracks improvements. Without improving the military services' processes for tracking funding information for barracks and informing funding decisions, DOD and Congress may not have visibility into the full and accurate costs of DOD's barracks improvement needs in a comprehensive and concise manner, making it difficult to make budget and funding decisions.

The military services have policies in place that can improve living conditions for service members residing in barracks—for example, policies that provide exemptions to barracks requirements. However, we identified three areas for improvement: (1) the services have not recently examined the lowest reasonable rank threshold for service members required to live in barracks, (2) OSD has not clarified guidance on who

should receive BAH, or exemptions, to living in barracks, and (3) the services have not reevaluated their policies defining personnel structures for the barracks manager position. By addressing these challenges, DOD can help improve readiness and morale by improving quality of life for service members required to live in barracks.

Finally, the military barracks program is a large entity that spans all four military services, and improving barracks conditions requires OSD oversight and collaboration with OSD and military service leadership. However, OSD has not provided sufficient oversight of housing programs for barracks. Furthermore, OSD has not established an oversight structure, such as quarterly programmatic reviews for barracks, to provide appropriate guidance or direction to the military services on tracking, assessing, and remediating deficiencies in barracks living conditions. Additionally, OSD has not facilitated collaboration across the military services, such as by establishing a joint strategy for the services to coordinate, collaborate, and share information on improving barracks conditions. Without increased OSD oversight and involvement in barracks housing programs, DOD will have a limited ability to identify and address long-standing challenges in barracks conditions across the military services' housing programs.

Recommendations for Executive Action

We are making a total of 31 recommendations to DOD.

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Energy, Installations, and Environment examines how the services conduct condition assessments for barracks and, based on that review, provides guidance to the services on how they should conduct these assessments, including, as appropriate, revisiting requirements related to the frequency of assessments, the number of systems to be assessed, the necessary level of inspector expertise, and the model used to conduct assessments. (Recommendation 1)

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Energy, Installations, and Environment clarifies DOD guidance on minimum standards for assignment to barracks related to health and safety, such as identifying health and safety risks serious enough to prevent installations from assigning service members to live in a barracks facility or room. (Recommendation 2)

The Secretary of the Army should update the Army's minimum standards for assignment to barracks to ensure they reflect DOD's guidance on

health and safety standards for barracks once DOD's minimum standards have been clarified. (Recommendation 3)

The Secretary of the Navy should update the Navy's minimum standards for assignment to barracks to ensure they reflect DOD's guidance on health and safety standards for barracks once DOD's minimum standards have been clarified. (Recommendation 4)

The Secretary of the Navy, in coordination with the Commandant of the Marine Corps, should update the Marine Corps' minimum standards for assignment to barracks to ensure they reflect DOD guidance on health and safety standards for barracks once DOD's minimum standards have been clarified. (Recommendation 5)

The Secretary of the Air Force should update the Air Force's minimum standards for assignment to barracks to ensure they reflect DOD guidance on health and safety standards for barracks once DOD's minimum standards have been clarified. (Recommendation 6)

The Secretary of the Army should update the Army's minimum standards for assignment to barracks to ensure they meet DOD's privacy and configuration standards, as required under the DOD Housing Manual. (Recommendation 7)

The Secretary of the Navy should update the Navy's minimum standards for assignment to barracks to ensure they meet DOD's privacy and configuration standards, as required under the DOD Housing Manual. (Recommendation 8)

The Secretary of the Navy, in coordination with the Commandant of the Marine Corps, should update the Marine Corps' minimum standards for assignment to barracks to ensure they meet DOD's privacy and configuration standards, as required under the DOD Housing Manual. (Recommendation 9)

The Secretary of the Air Force should update the Air Force's minimum standards for assignment to barracks to ensure they meet DOD's privacy and configuration standards, as required under the DOD Housing Manual. (Recommendation 10)

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Energy, Installations, and Environment sets requirements

related to waivers, including requirements for tracking and documenting waivers and time limits for waivers. (Recommendation 11)

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Energy, Installations, and Environment updates guidance to require the military services to survey service members living in barracks in a consistent and comparable way. (Recommendation 12)

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, Office of People Analytics, in coordination with the Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Housing, collects department-wide information, such as through the Status of Forces Survey, on service members' satisfaction with their housing, including barracks. (Recommendation 13)

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Energy, Installations, and Environment updates guidance on surveys of service members living in barracks to require the military services to include questions on effects of barracks conditions on reenlistment decisions. (Recommendation 14)

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that DOD develops a method to track and report complete Operation & Maintenance and Military Construction funding information in a combined manner for barracks housing programs, especially with respect to funding needed to improve barracks conditions, including both funding requirements and expenditures. In addition, the method should track and report complete Military Personnel funding with respect to funding needed to house service members typically required to live in barracks, such as service members living in private sector housing due to insufficient space in barracks, including both funding requirements and expenditures. (Recommendation 15)

The Secretary of the Army should develop and implement a method to ensure that the Army has visibility into all barracks Military Construction requirements identified at the installation level, regardless of whether they are submitted for funding. (Recommendation 16)

The Secretary of the Navy should develop and implement a method to ensure that the Navy has visibility into all barracks Military Construction requirements identified at the installation level, regardless of whether they are submitted for funding. (Recommendation 17)

The Secretary of the Navy, in coordination with the Commandant of the Marine Corps, should develop and implement a method to ensure that the Marine Corps has visibility into all barracks Military Construction requirements identified at the installation level, regardless of whether they are submitted for funding. (Recommendation 18)

The Secretary of the Air Force should develop and implement a method to ensure that the Air Force has visibility into all barracks Military Construction requirements identified at the installation level, regardless of whether they are submitted for funding. (Recommendation 19)

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Energy, Installations, and Environment examines how the services develop and use mission scores for barracks and, based on that review, provides guidance to the services on how they should develop and use these mission scores for purposes of barracks improvement prioritization, including, as appropriate, increasing consistency to the maximum extent practicable. (Recommendation 20)

The Secretary of the Army should conduct a systematic, objective analysis, that includes input from unit leaders, on the lowest reasonable rank threshold for Army unaccompanied service members required to live in military barracks, and adjust policies in accordance with that analysis. (Recommendation 21)

The Secretary of the Navy should conduct a systematic, objective analysis, that includes input from unit leaders, on the lowest reasonable rank threshold for Navy unaccompanied service members required to live in military barracks, and adjust policies in accordance with that analysis. (Recommendation 22)

The Secretary of the Navy, in coordination with the Commandant of the Marine Corps, should conduct a systematic, objective analysis, that includes input from unit leaders, on the lowest reasonable rank threshold for Marine Corps unaccompanied service members required to live in military barracks, and adjust policies in accordance with that analysis. (Recommendation 23)

The Secretary of the Air Force should conduct a systematic, objective analysis, that includes input from unit leaders, on the lowest reasonable rank threshold for Air Force unaccompanied service members required to live in military barracks, and adjust policies in accordance with that analysis. (Recommendation 24)

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Energy, Installations, and Environment adjusts guidance to clearly identify appropriate reasons for providing BAH to service members who would otherwise be required to live in barracks, including identifying factors installation commanders should consider when authorizing BAH. (Recommendation 25)

The Secretary of the Army should reevaluate existing Army policies regarding barracks manager positions for permanent party and training barracks, including whether barracks managers should be part time or full time and civilian or military and the level of training required, to ensure that the personnel structure is established at the levels necessary to accomplish mission and performance objectives. (Recommendation 26)

The Secretary of the Navy should reevaluate existing Navy policies regarding barracks manager positions for permanent party and training barracks, including whether barracks managers should be part time or full time and civilian or military and the level of training required, to ensure that the personnel structure is established at the levels necessary to accomplish mission and performance objectives. (Recommendation 27)

The Secretary of the Navy, in coordination with the Commandant of the Marine Corps, should reevaluate existing Marine Corps policies regarding barracks manager positions for permanent party and training barracks, including whether barracks managers should be part time or full time and civilian or military and the level of training required, to ensure that the personnel structure is established at the levels necessary to accomplish mission and performance objectives. (Recommendation 28)

The Secretary of the Air Force should reevaluate existing Air Force policies regarding barracks manager positions for permanent party and training barracks, including whether barracks managers should be part-time or full-time and civilian or military and the level of training required, to ensure that the personnel structure is established at the levels necessary to accomplish mission and performance objectives. (Recommendation 29)

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Energy, Installations, and Environment establishes an oversight structure, such as quarterly programmatic reviews, to increase oversight of military service barracks housing programs, including roles and responsibilities for relevant OSD offices. (Recommendation 30)

The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Energy, Installations, and Environment collaborate with the military services to define a common purpose and establish a joint strategy for improving barracks conditions. (Recommendation 31)

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We provided a draft of this report to DOD for review and comment. In its written comments, reproduced in their entirety in appendix II, DOD concurred with 23 of our 31 recommendations, and partially concurred with the remaining eight recommendations. In four instances, DOD provided planned or ongoing actions to address our recommendations. DOD also provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

DOD partially concurred with recommendation 15—the Secretary of Defense should ensure that DOD develops a method to track and report complete Operation & Maintenance (O&M), Military Construction (MILCON), and Military Personnel funding information in a combined manner for barracks housing programs, especially with respect to funding needed to improve barracks conditions, including both funding requirements and expenditures. In its response, DOD stated that the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Energy, Installations, and Environment will work with the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller) and the Military Departments on a method to track and report comprehensive O&M and MILCON funding information for barracks programs, to include both funding requirements and expenditures. However, DOD further stated that Military Personnel funding will not be tracked or reported since DOD may not use Military Personnel funding to improve or maintain barracks housing.

We agree that Military Personnel funding is not used to directly improve or maintain barracks housing. However, Military Personnel funding does support housing across DOD. As a result, we have revised the recommendation to clarify that we are referring to Military Personnel funding that is used to house service members who are typically required to live in barracks based on policy, but are instead provided housing allowances to live in private sector housing. As described in our report, this is often due to insufficient space in the barracks, substandard condition of the barracks, or other approved exceptions to policy, and the military services spent about \$1.3 billion on the housing allowances in fiscal year 2022 to house service members typically required to live in barracks. Without tracking and reporting this funding, it will be challenging for DOD to weigh different options for funding barracks and barracks-related needs, such as weighing the use of O&M, MILCON, or Military

Personnel—and specifically BAH—to meet housing needs for a given fiscal year. Moreover, Congress will have limited visibility into the full scope of funding requirements to house this service member population.

DOD partially concurred with recommendation 16—the Secretary of the Army should develop and implement a method to ensure that the Army has visibility into all barracks MILCON requirements identified at the installation level, regardless of whether they are submitted for funding. In its response, DOD stated that the Army’s annual Facility Investment Plan already satisfies this requirement, as each installation must submit every required barracks project as part of the Facility Investment Plan, regardless of the project’s funding status. As described in our report, Army guidance indicates commands should submit MILCON projects for new barracks when needed, but we found that installations do not always include barracks projects they need in their requirements submissions, including because they do not expect barracks projects to be competitive for funding. In other words, the Facility Investment Plan likely does not contain complete information on all Army installations’ barracks requirements. Therefore, we continue to believe that the Army should implement our recommendation. Making improvements to its process to ensure it has visibility into all barracks MILCON needs identified at the installation level would better position the Army to effectively identify, prioritize, and fund barracks construction needs across the service.

DOD partially concurred with recommendation 19—the Secretary of the Air Force should develop and implement a method to ensure that the Air Force has visibility into all barracks MILCON requirements identified at the installation level, regardless of whether they are submitted for funding. In its response, DOD stated that the Department of the Air Force has already satisfied this recommendation with its established master planning methodology and strategy known as the Air Force Dormitory Master Plan, which quantifies projected barracks requirements. As described in our report, the Air Force identifies MILCON requirements through its Dormitory Master Plan process. However, we also found that installations do not always submit all barracks projects for consideration, despite being encouraged to do so. For example, officials at one Air Force installation told us that additional MILCON barracks projects would result in improvements, but they did not submit these projects for consideration because they did not believe they would be competitive. Therefore, we continue to believe that the Air Force should implement our recommendation. Making improvements to its process to ensure it has visibility into all barracks MILCON needs identified at the installation level

would better position the Air Force to effectively identify, prioritize, and fund barracks construction needs across the service.

DOD partially concurred with recommendation 24—the Secretary of the Air Force should conduct a systematic, objective analysis, including input from unit leaders, on the lowest reasonable rank threshold for Air Force unaccompanied service members required to live in military barracks, and adjust policies in accordance with that analysis. In its response, DOD stated that the Department of the Air Force already implemented this recommendation, having completed a program review in 2017-2018, including determination of personnel required to reside in barracks, and having confirmed the existing policy in February 2023. DOD also stated that the Air Force will continue to review and assess barracks housing program requirements as needed.

However, we disagree that the Air Force has implemented the recommendation. As described in our report, the Air Force issued a memorandum in 2018 that reaffirmed existing rank requirements, and according to officials reaffirmed the same rank requirements again in 2023. During the course of our review, we asked for documentation of any analysis the Air Force had conducted to support its determinations and reaffirmations related to rank requirements. The Air Force provided a memo indicating that a team of Air Force officials and residents looked at policy areas, including optimal time in dormitories. However, the memo did not provide any information about how this analysis was conducted. In addition, these rank requirements were originally implemented in the late 1990s, according to Air Force officials. While we are encouraged that the Department of the Air Force will continue to review and assess barracks program requirements as needed, we continue to believe that the Air Force should conduct a systematic, objective analysis of this issue given that they could not provide the analysis that informed its decisions in 2018 or 2023. Without such analysis, DOD and the Air Force cannot be assured that its policy establishes the lowest reasonable rank for unaccompanied service members required to live in barracks.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of Defense, and the Secretaries of the Army, Navy and Air Force and the Commandant of the Marine Corps. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-2775 or FieldE1@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices

of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix III.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Elizabeth A. Field". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "E" and "F".

Elizabeth A. Field
Director, Defense Capabilities and Management

Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

This report examines the extent to which (1) the Department of Defense (DOD) has reliably assessed barracks conditions, (2) DOD has assessed the effects of barracks conditions on quality of life and readiness, (3) DOD has tracked funding related to barracks housing programs and made informed decisions for and related to barracks, (4) military services have reevaluated policies related to barracks housing programs, and (5) the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) has conducted oversight of military service housing programs for barracks and facilitated collaboration across the military services' barracks programs.

For objective one, we reviewed relevant DOD and military service policies on DOD housing and barracks. Specifically, we reviewed service policies to identify minimum standards for assignment to barracks related to health and safety, privacy and configuration, and general conditions, and compared against DOD requirements for these standards as well as relevant internal controls.¹ In cases where these minimum standards were not included in service housing guidance, we followed up with service housing officials and requested other service guidance that included minimum standards. Separately, we reviewed tables of contents and used key word searches in service guidance such as “barracks,” “unaccompanied housing,” “dormitories,” “minimum” and “standard,” to identify relevant text in service guidance related to minimum standards.

For minimum standards for assignment related to privacy and configuration, such as the total number of service members permitted to share a bedroom, and bathroom, minimum square footage requirements, and requirements for room configurations to include a living space, kitchen or kitchenette, we compared service minimum standards to those established in the DOD Housing manual. In doing so, for each aspect of privacy and configuration described above, we determined whether a military service policy exceeded, met, partially met, or did not meet the DOD standard.

We determined whether a service policy exceeded DOD minimum standards when standards required more square footage or privacy. We

¹DOD Manual 4165.63, *DOD Housing Management* (Oct. 28, 2010) (incorporating change 2, Aug. 31, 2018). Air Force Instruction 32-6000, *Housing Management* (Mar. 18, 2020) (incorporating Department of the Air Force Guidance Memorandum 2023-01 (June 12, 2023). Army Regulation 420-1, *Army Facilities Management* (Feb. 12, 2008) (incorporating Rapid Action Revision, Aug. 24, 2012). Commander, Navy Installations Command (CNIC) Manual 11103.2, *Unaccompanied Housing Operations Management* (Jan. 23, 2009). Marine Corps Order 11000.22, *Marine Corps Bachelor and Family Housing Management* (July 14, 2014) (incorporating Change 1, Jan. 22, 2018).

determined that a service policy met those standards when it required the same square footage, level of privacy, or room configuration as DOD standards. We determined a service policy partially met those standards when it required the same square footage, level of privacy, or room configuration for certain enlisted ranks, but not for all enlisted ranks per DOD guidance. Lastly, we determined a service policy did not meet DOD minimum standards when required square footage, level of privacy, or room configuration was below DOD standards. Further, we reviewed these same service policies on minimum standards to determine processes in place to obtain waivers for substandard barracks.

We also reviewed DOD and military service guidance to identify how each military service determines condition scores for barracks, and compared these efforts against relevant DOD policy that details the determinations of facility condition scores.² We also compared these efforts against *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, which state that management should obtain data from reliable sources in a timely manner, and use quality information to make informed decisions.³ We interviewed OSD and military service officials regarding their respective policies and procedures concerning barracks configuration, health and safety of the barracks, waiver processes, and determinations regarding condition scores.

We conducted site visits at a sample of 10 installations selected to cover each of the military services, varied barracks facility condition and uses, and differing climates. We first visited four installations in the Washington, D.C. area to include Fort George G. Meade, Maryland (Army), Joint Base Andrews-Naval Air Facility Washington, Maryland (Air Force), Naval Support Activity Bethesda, Maryland (Navy), and Marine Corps Base Quantico, Virginia (Marine Corps). We then visited other installations across the continental United States including Fort Carson, Colorado (Army); Joint Base San Antonio, Texas (Air Force); Naval Base Coronado and Naval Base San Diego, California (Navy); and Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego and Camp Pendleton, California (Marine Corps). To observe barracks conditions at each installation, we reviewed the inventory of barracks and toured barracks representing a range of

²Under Secretary of Defense (Acquisitions, Technology, and Logistics) Memorandum, *Standardizing Facility Condition Assessments* (Sept. 10, 2013) and DOD Instruction 4165.70, *Real Property Management* (April 6, 2005) (incorporating change 1, Aug. 31, 2018).

³GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: September 2014).

condition scores, configurations, and uses (permanent party, training, or other uses such as wounded warrior housing). At these installations, we met with installation leadership, housing office officials, and maintenance office officials to discuss the conditions of barracks, as well as the relevant policies and procedures for managing barracks and improving barracks conditions on each installation. Although our observations from these site visits are not generalizable to all military installations, they provide important context related to the conditions and configurations of barracks and the experiences of service members living in barracks.

Further, across the 10 installations we visited, we held 12 discussion groups, including 10 groups with enlisted service members living in government-owned barracks, one group with service members living in privatized barracks, and one group with service members generally required to live in barracks, but receiving a Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) to live off base instead. To identify participants in discussion groups, we asked installation officials to assemble groups of 8 to 10 participants currently living in military barracks. Discussion groups included enlisted service members with a range of ranks (E-1 to E-5), as well as some more senior-enlisted service members living in barracks because they were separated from family. In some cases, participants lived in barracks we toured. The discussion groups ranged from four to 20 participants. At each installation, we also met with groups of senior-enlisted service members who had responsibility for barracks residents, such as first sergeants or comparable ranks, to discuss the living conditions and effects on quality of life and readiness for junior-enlisted service members in their units. To identify appropriate senior-enlisted service members for these meetings, we asked installation officials to assemble two to three senior-enlisted service members, such as first sergeants or equivalents, who were responsible for junior-enlisted service members living in barracks. Meetings with senior-enlisted service members ranged from three to 25 participants, depending on the installation, with some installations identifying more senior-enlisted service members for inclusion in discussions than we originally requested.

We conducted content analysis of the narrative information obtained during discussion groups with junior-enlisted service members living in barracks to identify common themes. To do so, we conducted these discussion groups using the same semi-structured question set, and documented service member responses. We then identified initial codes for content analysis by reviewing responses and through team discussion. Beginning with the initial codes list, two analysts independently coded the

same discussion record, adding additional codes wherever relevant. The analysts then met to compare results, discussed coding choices, and resolved any coding differences. The two analysts repeated this process until they reached an established inter-coder agreement score above 0.80.⁴ After the two analysts established final codes, a supervisor reviewed coding for any discrepancies or inconsistencies and made adjustments where appropriate. The team then used final counts to determine the number of discussion groups out of 12 in which any code was discussed, both in response to specific questions we asked during the discussion groups, as well as overall across all questions asked. The information we collected from these discussion groups provided anecdotal evidence regarding barracks conditions and is not generalizable to the entire population of service members living in barracks.

For objective two, we reviewed DOD's housing instruction, housing manual, and broader guidance focused on monitoring quality of life and effects on readiness.⁵ We assessed the reliability of survey data from DOD's 2019 Status of Forces Survey. To do so, we reviewed survey instruments and past results of DOD-wide surveys focused on housing, interviewed knowledgeable officials, and reviewed survey documentation and methodology. We determined that these survey results were sufficiently reliable for our purposes. In addition, we compared a DOD memorandum that details requirements for the military services' tenant satisfaction surveys against requirements in the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020, and discussed with officials how DOD was implementing the requirements in the Act and the DOD memorandum.⁶ Further, we reviewed service-specific policies and procedures for surveying service members about the effects of barracks conditions on the quality of life of service members that live in barracks. We also compared existing surveys against DOD's memo and other DOD guidance that requires OSD and services to assess service member

⁴We calculated the inter-coder agreement score for each discussion group as: total number of code agreements divided by the sum of total agreements and total disagreements.

⁵DOD Instruction 4165.70, *Real Property Management* (Apr. 6, 2005) (incorporating change 1, Aug. 31, 2018). DOD Manual 4165.63, *DOD Housing Management* (Oct. 28, 2010) (incorporating change 2, Aug. 31, 2018). DOD Directive 5124.02: *Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness (USD(P&R))* (June 23, 2008).

⁶Assistant Secretary of Defense (Sustainment) Memorandum, *Tenant Satisfaction Survey Policy for DOD Privatized, Owned or Leased Housing* (Nov. 16, 2020). Pub. L. No. 116-92 (2019).

satisfaction with housing and the effect of housing on decisions to reenlist, and to monitor the morale and welfare aspects of barracks housing. We assessed the reliability of service-level surveys of barracks residents by reviewing survey documentation, and interviewing and reviewing written responses from knowledgeable officials. We determined these surveys to be sufficiently reliable for reporting on general qualitative information for those responding to the survey.

As part of our previously mentioned discussion groups with service members living in barracks and interviews of senior-enlisted service members with responsibility for barracks residents conducted during installation site visits, we asked the service members questions about the effects of living conditions on quality of life and readiness, among other topics.

For objective three, we reviewed DOD and military service guidance and documentation related to barracks financial management and budgeting, such as DOD's *Financial Management Regulation* and military service long-term investment master planning documents. In addition, we reviewed DOD budget materials and budget data. We met with OSD and military service officials to discuss the policies and procedures that guide the development of budgetary requests for facility restoration, modernization, and restoration funding and military construction funding.⁷ We also met with these officials to discuss the BAH that funds housing for service members living outside of the barracks in private sector housing in the U.S. because of insufficient space, or other exemptions, and how those determinations are made. We compared DOD and service budgeting guidance and processes against relevant provisions in DOD's *Financial Management Regulation*, among other criteria.

We obtained and analyzed DOD active-duty military personnel, pay, and BAH data for service members assigned to duty stations in the United States. In analyzing this data, we determine the number of service members who live in barracks, and the number of service members who should live in barracks—based on family status and rank—but who live in private sector housing pursuant to military service exceptions.⁸ Using this

⁷DOD Instruction 4165.70. Air Force Instruction, 32-6000. Army Regulation 420-1. *Army Facilities Management*. CNIC Manual 11103.2. Marine Corps Order 11000.22.

⁸We analyzed data from the Defense Manpower Data Center spanning three files: (1) Active-Duty Military Personnel Records, (2) Active Components Military Pay File Extracts, and (3) Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) File.

data, we also determined the estimated cost of housing those service members in private sector housing rather than the barracks by calculating the amount of BAH over the time period of fiscal years 2018 through 2022. To conduct the analysis, we used a monthly snapshots across each fiscal year to identify the service members, as well as data fields related to rank, number of dependents, and years of military service.⁹ To assess the reliability of data, we met with knowledgeable officials, performed electronic testing of the data, including checking for missing values and examining outliers, and reviewed related documentation. We determined that this data was sufficiently reliable for the purpose of this objective. As a result of this process, we excluded certain records from our analysis, including:

- We excluded data records from fiscal years 2013 through 2017 because data from those years did not include partial BAH payments for service members in the Army, Air Force, and Navy during those years. According to officials, prior to 2018, the data system used by these services to record and report BAH costs included partial BAH payments in a different data field, which was not reported to the Defense Manpower Data Center.¹⁰
- We excluded monthly snapshots for May 2019, January 2020, and February 2020. An official with knowledge of the data told us that the data for these months was corrupted and could not be recovered.
- We determined that fewer than 2 percent of data records were missing rank information in the data files we analyzed, and excluded those records from our analysis.
- We determined that fewer than 2 percent of data records contained negative values for BAH amounts. According to an official with knowledge of the data, these negative amounts represented deductions of BAH amounts from service members, such as for overpayment corrections, and we excluded them from our analysis.

⁹According to Navy guidance, E-4s with fewer than 4 years of service are required to live in barracks, and E-4s with 4 or more years of service are required to live in barracks if installations have sufficient space. For the purposes of our data analysis, we identified all Navy E-4s as being required to live in barracks. We included in our analysis all Navy E-4s being paid partial BAH to determine the number of Navy service members living in barracks.

¹⁰Despite this discrepancy in the DOD data we reviewed, service members living in barracks in the Army, Air Force, and Navy were paid partial BAH prior to fiscal year 2018.

Lastly, we reviewed policies and documentation and interviewed OSD and service officials regarding development of mission scores for barracks.¹¹ We reviewed mission categorizations and mission scores, when provided by the services, and discussed those scores and associated processes with service and installation officials.

For objective four, we reviewed DOD and service policies to identify the requirements for each service regarding the rank or paygrade threshold and years of service required to live in the barracks.¹² We discussed these policies and associated reasons for these requirements with military service officials, and we reviewed related documentation or analyses provided. Further, we assessed these policies to determine the exceptions to rank requirements allowed within each service. We compared these policies and processes to *Military Compensation Background Papers*, which state that military compensation should be based on certain underlying principles, including equity and fairness, and that few things undermine morale more than a sense of unfair treatment.¹³ We also compared them to *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, which states that management should implement control activities through policies, and that each unit should document policies in the appropriate level of detail to allow management to effectively monitor the control activity.¹⁴

Additionally, during site visits described above, we spoke with barracks managers responsible for the barracks we toured about their duties related to managing and improving barracks conditions. We discussed the barracks manager position with military service officials and reviewed relevant military service policies. We compared the service-specific barracks manager position structure and function against DOD Directive 1100.4, *Guidance for Manpower Management*, which states that

¹¹Commander, Navy Installations Command Instruction 11100.1A, *Mission Dependency Index* (May 29, 2018), U.S. Air Force *Tactical Mission Dependency Index (T-MDI) Sustainment Playbook* (Sept. 28, 2021), and Headquarters Department of the Army Executive Order 265-17, *Facilities Readiness Drivers* (Aug. 3, 2017).

¹²Air Force Instruction 32-6000. Army Regulation 420-1. CNIC Manual 11103.2. Marine Corps Order 11000.22.

¹³DOD, Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, *Military Compensation Background Papers: Compensation Elements and Related Manpower Cost Items, Their Purposes and Legislative Backgrounds*, 8th ed. (July 2018).

¹⁴[GAO-14-704G](#).

personnel requirements are driven by workload and shall be established at the minimum levels necessary to accomplish mission and performance objectives, and that existing policies, procedures, and structures shall be periodically assessed to ensure efficient and effective uses of resources.¹⁵

Lastly, to describe current privatized barracks projects, as well as future plans related to this type of housing, we discussed existing privatized barracks with relevant OSD, Army, and Navy officials, and we discussed military service officials' perspectives on barracks privatization projects. We toured privatized barracks at Fort Meade, Maryland (Army) and Naval Station San Diego, California (Navy). We discussed these privatized barracks projects with installation officials, housing officials, and representatives from the private housing development companies, and we held one discussion group with service members living in privatized barracks at one of these installations, using the same methodology described above regarding discussion groups with service members living in military barracks. We reviewed recent House Armed Services Committee direction for DOD to report on the feasibility of privatizing barracks.¹⁶

For objective five, we reviewed relevant legislation and DOD policies that detail oversight of DOD housing and coordination that should occur within the department regarding housing.¹⁷ Specifically, we reviewed roles and responsibilities of OSD positions regarding housing and discussed oversight provided by OSD with relevant OSD and service officials. We assessed this oversight framework against existing policies and relevant *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, which state that responsibilities of an oversight body include overseeing the entity's operations and where appropriate, making oversight decisions so that the entity achieves its objectives.¹⁸ In addition to the DOD Housing Manual that details required coordination that is to occur, we also reviewed key practices identified in our past report on inter-agency coordination, which states that agencies can enhance and sustain their collaborative efforts

¹⁵DOD Directive 1100.4, *Guidance for Manpower Management* (Feb. 12, 2005).

¹⁶H.R. Rep. No. 117-397, at 377 (2022).

¹⁷Pub. L. No. 117-263 (2022). DOD Instruction 4165.63, *DOD Housing* (July 21, 2008) (incorporating change 2, Aug. 31, 2018).

¹⁸[GAO-14-704G](#).

by establishing joint strategies to accomplish a common outcome.¹⁹ We met with OSD and service officials with knowledge of existing collaboration and coordination efforts on barracks housing programs, and reviewed DOD guidance on collaboration to compare these existing efforts against DOD requirements for collaboration as well as key practices described above.

We conducted this performance audit from February 2022 to September 2023 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

¹⁹DOD Manual 4165.63. GAO, *Government Performance Management: Leading Practices to Enhance Interagency Collaboration and Address Crosscutting Challenges*, [GAO-23-105520](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 24, 2023).

Appendix II: Department of Defense Comments



ENERGY, INSTALLATIONS,
AND ENVIRONMENT

OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

3400 DEFENSE PENTAGON
WASHINGTON, DC 20301-3400

August 29, 2023

Ms. Elizabeth Field
Director, Defense Capabilities and Management
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington DC 20548

Dear Ms. Field,

This is the Department of Defense (DoD) response to the GAO Draft Report, GAO-23-105797, "MILITARY BARRACKS: Poor Living Conditions Undermine Quality of Life and Readiness," dated July 28, 2023.

Enclosed is DoD's response to the subject report recommendations. Upon publication of the final report by GAO, Corrective Action Plans for each recommendation will be developed by my office with input from the Military Departments.

My point of contact for this report is Ms. Megan Purkey, who can be reached at 703-614-0867 or megan.d.purkey.civ@mail.mil.

Sincerely,

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Patricia L. Coury
Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense
(Housing)

Enclosure:
As stated

GAO DRAFT REPORT DATED JULY 28, 2023
GAO-23-105797 (GAO CODE 105797)

“MILITARY BARRACKS: POOR LIVING CONDITIONS UNDERMINE QUALITY OF
LIFE AND READINESS”

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE COMMENTS
TO THE GAO RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION 1: The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Energy, Installations, and Environment examines how the services conduct condition assessments for barracks and, based on that review, provides guidance to the services on how they should conduct these assessments, including, as appropriate, revisiting requirements related to the frequency of assessments, the number of systems to be assessed, the necessary level of inspector expertise, and the model used to conduct assessments.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Energy, Installations, and Environment (ASD(EI&E)) will work with the Military Departments (MilDeps) to examine how each military service conducts condition assessments of its unaccompanied housing (UH). Based on that review, the ASD(EI&E) will provide updated Department of Defense (DoD) guidance on the requirements for future MilDep assessments of UH conditions.

RECOMMENDATION 2: The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Energy, Installations, and Environment clarifies DOD guidance on minimum standards for assignment to barracks related to health and safety, such as identifying health and safety risks serious enough to prevent installations from assigning service members to live in a barracks facility or room.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The ASD(EI&E), in coordination with the MilDeps, will issue guidance to clarify the minimum UH health and safety standards for assignment of service members.

RECOMMENDATION 3: The Secretary of the Army should update the Army’s minimum standards for assignment to barracks to ensure they reflect DOD’s guidance on health and safety standards for barracks, once DOD’s minimum standards have been clarified.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. Upon completion of collaboration with the MilDeps, and OSD publication of clarifying guidance on minimum DoD health and safety standards for UH assignment, the Army will review its standards and update its guidance, as necessary, to ensure compliance with the minimum DoD standards (or more stringent standards set by the Army).

RECOMMENDATION 4: The Secretary of the Navy should update the Navy minimum standards for assignment to barracks to ensure they reflect DOD’s guidance on health and safety standards for barracks, once DOD minimum standards have been clarified.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. Upon completion of collaboration with the MilDepts, and OSD publication of clarifying guidance on minimum DoD health and safety standards for UH assignment, the Department of the Navy (DoN) will review the Navy UH standards and update its guidance, as necessary, to ensure compliance with the minimum DoD standards.

RECOMMENDATION 5: The Secretary of the Navy, in coordination with the Commandant of the Marine Corps, should update Marine Corps minimum standards for assignment to barracks to ensure they reflect DOD guidance on health and safety standards for barracks once DOD minimum standards have been clarified.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. Upon completion of collaboration with the MilDepts and OSD publication of clarifying guidance on minimum DoD health and safety standards for UH assignment, the DoN, in coordination with the Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps (USMC), will review the USMC UH standards and update its guidance, as necessary, to ensure compliance with the minimum DoD standards.

RECOMMENDATION 6: The Secretary of the Air Force should update Air Force minimum standards for assignment to barracks to ensure they reflect DOD guidance on health and safety standards for barracks once DOD minimum standards have been clarified.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. Upon completion of collaboration with the MilDepts, and OSD publication of clarifying guidance on minimum DoD health and safety standards for UH assignment, the Department of the Air Force (DAF) will review its standards and update its guidance, as necessary, to ensure compliance with the minimum DoD standards.

RECOMMENDATION 7: The Secretary of the Army should update the Army's minimum standards for assignment to barracks to ensure they meet DOD's privacy and configuration standards, as required under the DOD Housing Manual.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The Army will review its standards and update its guidance, as necessary, to ensure compliance with the minimum DoD standards for assignment.

RECOMMENDATION 8: The Secretary of the Navy should update the Navy minimum standards for assignment to barracks to ensure they meet DOD's privacy and configuration standards, as required under the DOD Housing Manual.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The DoN will review the Navy UH standards and update its guidance, as necessary, to ensure compliance with the minimum DoD standards.

RECOMMENDATION 9: The Secretary of the Navy, in coordination with the Commandant of the Marine Corps, should update Marine Corps minimum standards for assignment to barracks to ensure they meet DOD's privacy and configuration standards, as required under the DOD Housing Manual.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The DoN, in coordination with the USMC Commandant, will review the USMC UH standards and update its guidance, as necessary, to ensure compliance with the minimum DoD standards.

RECOMMENDATION 10: The Secretary of the Air Force should update Air Force minimum standards for assignment to barracks to ensure they meet DOD's privacy and configuration standards, as required under the DOD Housing Manual.

DoD RESPONSE: Partially Concur. The configuration of DAF UH and construction standards have evolved over many decades and DAF policy has been established based on existing inventory related to minimum standard configurations, with focuses on square footage, maximum number of Service members per room and maximum number of members sharing bathrooms. In addition, the latest DAF UH construction standards for replacement or new construction provides for kitchenettes. The DAF believes that additional guidance from OSD is needed prior to updating its guidance, particularly addressing cooking/eating options. Therefore, upon completion of collaboration with the MilDeps, and OSD publication of clarifying guidance, the DAF will update its guidance, as needed, to ensure compliance with the minimum OSD standards.

RECOMMENDATION 11: The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Energy, Installations, and Environment sets requirements related to waivers, including requirements for tracking and documenting waivers and time limits for waivers.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The ASD(EI&E), in coordination with the MilDeps, will set DoD requirements related to waivers for UH standards, including tracking, documentation, and time limits.

RECOMMENDATION 12: The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Energy Installations, and Environment updates guidance to require the military services to survey service members living in barracks in a consistent and comparable way.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. To ensure a consistent and comparable approach, the ASD(EI&E), in coordination with the MilDeps, and the InterService Survey Coordinating Committee (ISSCC) will update DoD guidance for the military services to survey Service members residing in UH.

RECOMMENDATION 13: The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, Office of People Analytics, in coordination with the Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Housing, collects department-wide information, such as through the Status of Forces Survey, on service members' satisfaction with their housing, including barracks.

DoD RESPONSE: Partially Concur. The ASD(EI&E), as the DoD Chief Housing Officer, has the overall lead for DoD surveys to determine service member satisfaction with their on-base housing, including barracks. In December 2022, on behalf of the ASD(EI&E), the Deputy

Assistant Secretary of Defense for Housing (DASD(H)) established a working group with the MilDeps to update and streamline the DoD housing satisfaction survey questions and process. The draft updated survey questions and process will require coordination and approval by the Office of People Analytics (OPA) within the Defense Personnel Analytics Center (DPAC), and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) prior to survey implementation, which is anticipated in fiscal year 2025. OMB approval is required as part of OMB's oversight of Executive Agency adherence to the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995, as amended.

RECOMMENDATION 14: The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Energy, Installations, and Environment updates guidance on surveys of service members living in barracks to require the military services to include questions on effects of barracks conditions on reenlistment decisions.

DoD RESPONSE: Partially Concur. The ASD(EI&E) will work in coordination with the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness and OPA within DPAC to determine the appropriate survey vehicle(s) for MilDeps to ask service members about the effects of their current UH living conditions on their reenlistment decisions, and to update guidance on such surveys, as appropriate. Part of this review will include a determination as to whether such survey questions should be included in the DoD Status of Forces survey rather than individual MilDep surveys of service members. This determination will involve engagement with OMB as part of their required review and approval of the Status of Forces Survey question set.

RECOMMENDATION 15: The Secretary of Defense should ensure that DOD develops a method to track and report complete O&M, MILCON, and Military Personnel funding information in a combined manner for barracks housing programs, especially with respect to funding needed to improve barracks conditions, including both funding requirements and expenditures.

DoD RESPONSE: Partially Concur. The ASD(EI&E) will work with the OUSD(Comptroller) and the MilDeps on a method to track and report comprehensive O&M and MilCon funding information for UH programs, to include both funding requirements and expenditures. Military Personnel funding will not be tracked or reported since DoD may not use MILPER funding to improve or maintain UH housing.

RECOMMENDATION 16: The Secretary of the Army should develop and implement a method to ensure that the Army has visibility into all barracks MILCON requirements identified at the installation level, regardless of whether they are submitted for funding.

DoD RESPONSE: Partially Concur. The Army's annual Facility Investment Plan (FIP) already satisfies this requirement; each installation must submit every required barracks project as part of the FIP, regardless of the project's funding status.

RECOMMENDATION 17: The Secretary of the Navy should develop and implement a method to ensure that the service has visibility into all barracks MILCON requirements identified at the installation level, regardless of whether they are submitted for funding.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The DoN will develop and implement a method to ensure it has visibility into all barracks MilCon requirements identified at the installation level, regardless of their funding status.

RECOMMENDATION 18: The Secretary of the Navy, in coordination with the Commandant of the Marine Corps, should develop and implement a method to ensure that the Marine Corps has visibility into all barracks MILCON requirements identified at the installation level, regardless of whether they are submitted for funding.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The DoN, through the USMC, will improve upon its existing process for validating UH MilCon and O&M project approvals to ensure maximum use of inventory and investments.

RECOMMENDATION 19: The Secretary of the Air Force should develop and implement a method to ensure that the Air Force has visibility into all barracks MILCON requirements identified at the installation level, regardless of whether they are submitted for funding.

DoD RESPONSE: Partially Concur. The DAF already satisfied this recommendation with its established master planning methodology and strategy (first published in 1997), known as the Air Force Dormitory Master Plan (AFDMP). The AFDMP quantifies projected UH requirements, captures facility data, identifies deficits and requirements for sustainment, restoration and modernization, and replacement, and provides recommendations and cost estimates for each installation's UH program. The Installation DMPs are conducted and submitted for inclusion in the overall DAF DMP, which provides a roll-up of all installation requirements.

RECOMMENDATION 20: The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Energy Installations, and Environment examines how the services develop and use mission scores for barracks and, based on that review, provides guidance to the services on how they should develop and use these mission scores for purposes of barracks improvement prioritization, including, as appropriate, increasing consistency to the maximum extent practicable.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The ASD(EI&E), in coordination with the MilDeps, will examine how the services develop and use mission scores for UH, and based on that review, will provide DoD guidance on how they should develop and use UH mission scores for the purposes of prioritizing UH improvement projects, with a focus on increasing consistency.

RECOMMENDATION 21: The Secretary of the Army should conduct a systematic, objective analysis, including input from unit leaders, on the lowest reasonable rank threshold for Army unaccompanied service members required to live in military barracks, and adjust policies in accordance with that analysis.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The Undersecretary of the Army has directed a review of current UH assignments policy. The Army will adjust policies as necessary in accordance with the outcome of that review.

RECOMMENDATION 22: The Secretary of the Navy should conduct a systematic, objective analysis, including input from unit leaders, on the lowest reasonable rank threshold for Navy unaccompanied service members required to live in military barracks, and adjust policies in accordance with that analysis.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The DoN has begun an analysis of its Navy UH assignment policies. The DoN will adjust Navy UH policies as necessary in accordance with the outcome of that review.

RECOMMENDATION 23: The Secretary of the Navy, in coordination with the Commandant of the Marine Corps, should conduct a systematic, objective analysis, including input from unit leaders, on the lowest reasonable rank threshold for Marine Corps unaccompanied service members required to live in military barracks, and adjust policies in accordance with that analysis.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The DoN, in coordination with the USMC Commandant, has begun an analysis of the USMC UH assignment policies. The DoN will adjust USMC UH policies as necessary in accordance with the outcome of that review.

RECOMMENDATION 24: The Secretary of the Air Force should conduct a systematic, objective analysis, including input from unit leaders, on the lowest reasonable rank threshold for Air Force unaccompanied service members required to live in military barracks, and adjust policies in accordance with that analysis.

DoD RESPONSE: Partially Concur. The DAF already implemented this recommendation, having completed a program review in 2017-2018, including a determination of personnel required to reside in UH. In February 2023, the Chief of Staff of the Air Force confirmed the existing policy. The DAF will continue to review and assess UH program requirements as needed.

RECOMMENDATION 25: The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Energy Installations, and Environment adjusts guidance to clearly identify appropriate reasons for providing BAH to service members who would otherwise be required to live in barracks, including identifying factors installation commanders should consider when authorizing BAH.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The ASD(EI&E), in coordination with the MilDeps, will issue DoD guidance to clarify the appropriate reasons for which the MilDeps may issue Certificates of Non-Availability (CNA), which in turn initiate housing allowances (e.g., BAH), to service members who would otherwise be required to live in barracks. The guidance will include identifying factors installation commanders should consider when authorizing CNAs.

RECOMMENDATION 26: The Secretary of the Army should reevaluate existing Army policies regarding barracks manager positions for permanent party and training barracks, including whether barracks managers should be part-time or full-time and civilian or military and the level of training required, to ensure that the personnel structure is established at the levels necessary to accomplish mission and performance objectives.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The Army will evaluate the feasibility of providing civilian oversight of UH through the installation Military Housing Office.

RECOMMENDATION 27: The Secretary of the Navy should reevaluate existing Navy policies regarding barracks manager positions for permanent party and training barracks, including whether barracks managers should be part-time or full-time and civilian or military and the level of training required, to ensure that the personnel structure is established at the levels necessary to accomplish mission and performance objectives.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The DoN will evaluate existing policies regarding Navy UH management and will include, as part of the evaluation, whether Navy UH oversight should be conducted by civilian and/or military staff and the level of training required for successful accomplishment of mission and performance objectives.

RECOMMENDATION 28: The Secretary of the Navy, in coordination with the Commandant of the Marine Corps, should reevaluate existing Marine Corps policies regarding barracks manager positions for permanent party and training barracks, including whether barracks managers should be part-time or fulltime and civilian or military and the level of training required, to ensure that the personnel structure is established at the levels necessary to accomplish mission and performance objectives.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The DoN, in coordination with USMC Commandant, has already begun evaluating existing policies regarding USMC UH management and will include, as part of the evaluation, whether USMC UH oversight should be conducted by civilian and/or military staff and the level of training required for successful accomplishment of mission and performance objectives.

RECOMMENDATION 29: The Secretary of the Air Force should reevaluate existing Air Force policies regarding barracks manager positions for permanent party and training barracks, including whether barracks managers should be part-time or full-time and civilian or military and the level of training required, to ensure that the personnel structure is established at the levels necessary to accomplish mission and performance objectives.

DoD RESPONSE: Partially Concur. Current DAF policy provides for a UH management section primarily comprised of military Airmen Dorm Leaders (ADLs) with up to one civilian authorized to provide continuity. The DAF ADLs are all non-commissioned officers in the grade of E-5 or greater who perform ADL-work as their full-time duty. However, the DAF is working to complete an updated Air Force Manpower Determinant for Installation Housing Management Offices that includes the UH requirements for oversight of permanent party facilities. The

outcome of that determinant may result in a reevaluation of DAF policies regarding UH oversight.

RECOMMENDATION 30: The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Energy Installations, and Environment establishes an oversight structure, such as quarterly programmatic reviews, to increase oversight of military service barracks housing programs, including roles and responsibilities for relevant OSD offices.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The ASD(EI&E) will establish a DoD UH oversight structure that increases OSD oversight of the military service UH programs.

RECOMMENDATION 31: The Secretary of Defense should ensure that the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Energy, Installations and Environment collaborate with the military services to define a common purpose and establish a joint strategy for improving barracks conditions.

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. The ASD(EI&E) will collaborate with the MilDepts on a common purpose and joint strategy for improving UH conditions and oversight.

Appendix III: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact:

Elizabeth A. Field, (202) 512-2775 or FieldE1@gao.gov

Staff**Acknowledgments:**

In addition to the contact named above, Suzanne M. Perkins (Assistant Director), Miranda Cohen (Analyst in Charge), Andrew Altobello, John Bornmann, Vincent Buquicchio, Matthew St. Geme, Hunter Graff, Gina Hoover, David Jones, Felicia Lopez, Tara Porter, and Emily Wilson made key contributions to this report.

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