



CHILD
SOLDIERS
INTERNATIONAL

WHY **18** MATTERS

A Rights-Based Analysis of Child Recruitment

WHY 18 MATTERS

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CONTENTS

Glossary of Terms	2	'Voluntary' Conscription of Children	28
Foreword.....	3	The Military Training Process	29
Executive Summary	4	The Military Environment	36
Introduction	8	Participation in Hostilities.....	40
Child Recruitment by State		Leaving the Armed Forces.....	42
Armed Forces: An Overview	12	Quantifying the Impact	44
Extent of Child Recruitment.....	13	Mental Health and Alcohol Use.....	45
Child Recruitment and the Law.....	14	Aggression and Violence.....	47
The Child Recruit's Journey	18	General Health	48
Targeting Children for Recruitment.....	19	Socioeconomic Outcomes.....	48
Socioeconomic Targeting	20	Conclusion: The Case for 18	52
Fantasy Marketing	21	The Harm of Child Recruitment	53
Cadet Forces.....	21	The Positive Case for Change	54
Recruiting in Schools.....	22	Recommendations	55
Military Schools	23	Bibliography	56
Enlistment and Consent	24	Country Index.....	61

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

AFFLUENT COUNTRIES

For the purposes of this report, 'affluent' refers approximately to the richest third of countries globally, as measured by Gross Domestic Product per capita per annum (equivalent to approx. \$15,000 or greater).

ARMED FORCES (STATE)

The principal military organisation of a nation state, comprising a land force (army) and often also naval and air forces.

ARMED GROUP (NON-STATE)

A military organisation or group not integral to the state armed forces.

CHILD

Per international law, this report defines a child as any person under the age of 18.

CONSCRIPT

A recruit who begins military employment by state compulsion.

CRC

Convention on the Rights of the Child.

ENLISTED RECRUIT

A recruit who begins military employment at the lowest rank (typically with a background of socioeconomic disadvantage).

NCO

Non-commissioned Officer. A common term for an enlisted recruit who has been promoted to a position with varying degrees of management responsibility.

OFFICER RECRUIT

A recruit who begins military employment in a senior position (typically with a background of socioeconomic privilege).

OPAC

Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict.

PTSD

Post-traumatic stress disorder.

RECRUIT

A person used by a military organisation or group for any military purpose, not limited to participation in hostilities.

FOREWORD

When I spoke with a warlord 'General' about why he recruited children he said, 'Children are abundant, stupid, they obey orders, don't ask questions, and cost nothing. They are very cheap! They never desert, cannot go home and I can get as many as I want immediately.'

But it is different when children are recruited legitimately by State armed forces, isn't it? They can make an informed and responsible decision, guided by their parents, they can get an education that their parents might not be able to afford, vocational training for future employment, and they are medically insured. They get a good opportunity for life.

Is that so?

In one UN Member State judges tell boys in conflict with the law that they have a choice: either prison or the army. This sounds like the army is equivalent to punishment rather than a consideration of the best interests of a child - even though this should be mandatory!

Why are States still interested in enlisting children, even if there is no war, no pressing need? Maybe because this way statistics for jobless youth look better?

Not all children are targeted by army agents. The overwhelming majority of child recruits are from poor and/or troubled backgrounds, they don't like school or have difficulties there, and are not able to read texts fluently - certainly not complex legal ones. They don't see what long term consequences are hidden in rather repressive contracts, and nor do their parents. So much for informed and guided decisions!

Instead of finding the glamorous, heroic environment described to them in recruitment advertising, they often find harsh conditions, bullying, humiliation used as a means of control, restriction of freedom of movement, and, even more important, restriction of freedom of thinking or expression. Is there anyone who really believes that a military school is a place for discussion and individual development? Is it not rather a place to learn, above all, to obey as a reflex? Is this not the reason why a judge gives the choice mentioned above? To learn to function and obey without thinking? To have vocational training for the needs of the army, not for a civilian career?

What about health? Bullying, sexual violence, peer pressure into violent behaviour, all this leading to a high suicide rate. There is huge alcohol consumption to demonstrate 'manhood' and injuries in training with immediate discharge. Are these the 'highest attainable standards of health' that a child has a right to?

But surely there is not only enlistment to the ranks for poor children – isn't there also officer training for rather well-to-do children? There is. But when a child has a family member in the army who tries hard to convince him to enlist, does he really have a free choice?

'Why does 18 matter?'

Because 'over 18s' are more likely to believe less easily and think more critically.

This is 'why 18 matters'!

Justice Renate Winter

Chairperson, UN Committee on the Rights of the Child

‘Clearly one of the most urgent priorities is to remove everyone under 18 years of age from armed forces.’

Graça Machel, Impact of armed conflict on children (2)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE RECRUITMENT OF CHILDREN BY STATE ARMED FORCES

As of April 2018, more than four-fifths (167) of states worldwide have now committed in law to ‘take all feasible measures’ not to use children under the age of 18 in armed conflict or any other hostilities. Two-thirds of states with armed forces have further committed to the so-called ‘straight-18’ standard: no recruitment of children for any military purpose. The remainder have yet to reach this standard, continuing to capitalise on the failure of international law to forbid recruiting children from age 16.

States that still allow child recruitment in law tend to be relatively affluent and democratically controlled; they include five of the G7 states, for example. States often suggest that because parental consent is required and child recruits are

not usually used in armed conflict, their rights are unaffected. To the contrary, this report shows that the practice causes material harm to children and routinely violates several of their fundamental rights. This report catalogues these violations, drawing on evidence from epidemiological research, official sources, and the testimony of former child recruits.

THE CHILD RECRUIT’S JOURNEY

The journey of a child recruit begins long before they become eligible for military employment, and continues through their enlistment, training, and ultimate discharge from the armed forces:

Targeting Children

Children, particularly those from low-income backgrounds, are targeted for potential recruitment from a young age. Marketing presents military life in glamorous terms, sanitises war as heroic in the child’s imagination, and frequently encourages children to

associate military life with action adventure films and videogames. Omitted from recruiters’ marketing are the risks and trauma of war, the harsh conditions of the military environment, and the restrictive legal obligations that follow enlistment. In so misleading children, military marketing is exploitative.

Schools and Youth Organisations

Education settings are a major site for promoting military employment to children below enlistment age. The US army describes schools as the ‘cornerstone’ of its recruitment strategy, for example.¹ In addition, many states subsidise cadet forces and military schools to immerse children in an apparently risk-free simulation of military life and begin to train them there in the techniques of warfare. In several countries, children in military schools are liable for an extended period of military employment after graduation.

The Contract

New child recruits commit themselves to absolute control by the state, accept limitations to fundamental rights, and face markedly increased long-term occupational risks. The contract, which can bind enlistees to serve for a period of years, could not be imposed lawfully on a civilian of any age in most economically developed countries. In restricting freedom and suspending fundamental rights, military terms of service are unambiguously inimical to the best interests of the child.

Adolescent Susceptibility

Neuroscientific research has found that children in mid-adolescence are markedly more likely than adults to make choices based on emotive appeal, and less able to evaluate the long-term consequences. Accordingly, a child in mid-adolescence is less able than an adult to make an informed and responsible choice about enlisting. This developmental susceptibility combines with the underdeveloped literacy of many child applicants and the salesmanship of recruiters to jeopardise a child's legal right to be 'fully informed' of the consequences of enlistment.² Each time a child enlists without full comprehension of the risks and obligations that follow, the choice is not 'genuinely voluntary' as required by law.³

Parental Involvement

Most armed forces are required by law to obtain the 'informed consent' of parents or guardians before a child can enlist. In practice, the involvement of parents may be only peripheral, the information provided to them aims to persuade rather than inform, and recruiters need only a signed form as evidence that parents fully comprehend the

risks their child faces. Parental consent, as a safeguard, assumes unreasonably that parents who have been abusive or neglectful of their child are as capable of defending his or her best interests as those who have been loving and responsible.

Child Conscription

Some states which operate adult conscription systems invite children to begin their compulsory service early. Many children opt for this to limit the impact of conscription on their civilian education and career plans. Since conscription is not 'genuinely voluntary', it ought not to involve children at all.

Training by Coercion

The primary purpose of initial military training is to ensure that child recruits will obey all orders by reflex and without question. It is a coercive process based on sustained psychological and physical stress, harsh discipline including humiliation and physical punishment, and tight restrictions on contact with family and friends. Abuses by instructors are widespread. Research in the US found that the rate of attempted suicide in the 2000s among army recruits (all ages) was four times higher during initial training than during deployment to Iraq or Afghanistan. As such, military training is wholly incompatible with states' legal obligation 'to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation...'⁴

46 STATES BELIEVED TO BE ENLISTING CHILDREN AS OF APRIL 2018

Afghanistan
Algeria
Australia
Austria
Bangladesh
Belgium
Bolivia
Cabo Verde
Canada
Chile
China
Cuba
Cyprus
Dominican Republic
DPRK
Egypt
El Salvador
Eritrea
France
German
Guinea-Bissau
Guyana
India
Iran
Israel
Mauritania
Mexico
Myanmar, Netherlands
New Zealand
Pakistan
Papua New Guinea
Saint Kitts and Nevis
São Tomé e Príncipe
Singapore
Somalia
South Sudan
Sudan
Syria
Tonga
Trinidad and Tobago
United Arab Emirates
United Kingdom
United States of America
Yemen
Zambia

1. For the full quotation and source, see "Recruiting in Schools," p. 22

2. OPAC art 3.

3. OPAC art 3.

4. CRC art 19.

Insubstantial Education

It is common for armed forces to describe training bases as education institutions and argue that child recruits enjoy an ongoing education; for example, the British army's main training site for child recruits is called the Army Foundation College. Typically, training centres for low-ranking military jobs do not operate to the standards expected of civilian education, basic skills education for child recruits is rudimentary, and the vocational training offered has limited transferable value to the civilian jobs market. These conditions fall short of states' legal obligation to direct education to 'the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential'.⁵

The Military Environment

Research in the UK and US has found that bullying, sexual violence, and heavy drinking are substantially more common in the armed forces than elsewhere, and that the youngest personnel (including child recruits) are the most affected. In common with findings from other countries, an investigation into sexual misconduct in the Canadian armed forces noted that relative immaturity is a 'prominent factor' in the elevated vulnerability of the youngest recruits, and that various military settings create 'particular conditions of vulnerability'.⁶

Participation In Hostilities

While most states do not routinely use children in the military theatre, some reserve the right to do so, or may do so in error; the UK and US have sent small numbers of child recruits to Iraq and Afghanistan, for example. Some armed forces post child recruits as armed guards at military sites, with the expectation that they may open fire in the event of an attack. Even when child recruits are not deployed in any way, their uniform could attract an attack from any hostile actor.

Child Trainee Attrition

Child recruits, especially those from economically deprived backgrounds, are more likely than adults to drop out of their training. A third of child recruits to the British army either leave or are dismissed during training, for example, which usually leaves them without work and out of the education system. Extensive research in the US armed forces has found repeatedly that child recruits from poorer backgrounds are more vulnerable to stress and more rebellious, which combine to increase the risk of early attrition. In addition, British research has found that child recruits are significantly more likely than adults to be discharged due to training injury, because their bones and musculature are not yet developed.

QUANTIFYING THE IMPACT OF MILITARY EMPLOYMENT ON CHILD RECRUITS

Research findings, particularly in the last decade, have begun to quantify the effect of military employment on young people, including child recruits. Research in the UK and US has shown that military personnel and veterans are more likely than civilians to experience stress-related mental health problems, drink heavily, and behave violently, and they have poorer general health in later life. The extent of these problems among recruits under the age of 18 is often not directly quantifiable from the data, but the studies examined for this report show repeatedly that younger recruits are most affected. In the UK, for example, the suicide rate among the army's youngest recruits is substantially higher than both the same age group in the civilian population, and adult recruits.

Although child recruits, who commonly come from deprived backgrounds, often have elevated rates of mental health and behaviour issues before they enlist, the research shows that military employment tends to aggravate these problems. Psychosocial vulnerabilities associated with an adverse childhood appear to combine

‘If I was to have a child that was 15 who wanted to join the army, I wouldn’t let them. I know...the army and what can happen. If they wanted to join at 18 that would be their own option.’

Wayne Sharrocks, British infantry, 2006-2013 (3).

hazardously with the stress of initial training (and often, later, traumatic war experiences) to increase the prevalence of stress-related disorders and violent behaviour. For example, research in the UK and US has found that young people are more likely to commit violent offences after they enlist than before. A popular belief that joining the army prevents anti-social behaviour is not supported by the available research, which points in the other direction.

Another popular assumption is that military employment is an effective route out of poverty for disadvantaged young people, but the long-term socioeconomic prospects of enlisted personnel are relatively poor. Research in the US has found that, since the end of the Second World War, veterans have been worse off than non-veterans from similar backgrounds. In the UK, the unemployment rate among infantry veterans – the main role group for child recruits – is substantially higher than that among civilians, including civilians with the lowest level of academic attainment. While some veterans testify that military employment has enhanced their socioeconomic status, the evidence indicates that this is the exception and, more often, that joining the armed forces prematurely disrupts children’s education and career prospects.

CONCLUSION

Now that most states have moved to end the recruitment of children by their armed forces, a global ban is at least foreseeable, if not within reach. It is striking that states which still rely on child recruits to staff their armed forces tend not to be the poorest, but the most prosperous. The reluctance thus far of these powerful states to embrace the straight-18 standard themselves diminishes their credibility when prescribing that same standard elsewhere, and so frustrates efforts across the world to eliminate the use of child soldiers.

On the evidence in this report, the view that child recruits in affluent, democratic states are protected from harm and violations of their rights is widely mistaken. From the misleading marketing, cursory consent arrangements and repressive contract, to the sustained stress of military training, multiple risks of a military environment, and a high rate of attrition, the recruitment of children by state armed forces is conspicuously detrimental. The reality is that the fundamental rights of child recruits are violated repeatedly throughout their engagement with military institutions.

Adult-only armed forces are slowly becoming the norm. While some straight-18 states

still rely on adult conscription, most do not, proving that recruiting children is not a strategic necessity, but a policy convenience. Research has shown that all-adult armed forces are more viable: they benefit from recruits who are more mature and resilient, need fewer safeguarding arrangements, are trained more quickly and are less likely to drop out, can be deployed immediately afterwards, and are more financially cost-effective. If they ever used to recruit children, they do not regret that they no longer do so. ■

5. CRC art 29.

6. For full quotation and source, see 'Sexual Violence, Assault and Harassment', p. 37.



NL

Introduction

‘In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interest of the child shall be a primary consideration.’

Article 3 (1) Convention on the Rights of the Child

Concerted international efforts to end the recruitment of children for military purposes began after the publication of Graça Machel’s major report in 1996, *The impact of armed conflict on children* (2). The report focused on the plight of younger children in poorer countries where they were widely used as participants in armed conflict. It found that exploiting children as participants in war was killing, maiming and psychiatrically injuring thousands of children every year.⁷ Further research has since shown that children who survive such war exposure suffer a radically increased risk of mental illness, behaviour problems, and underdeveloped literacy and numeracy, often leading to lasting poverty in adulthood (4).

While the Machel study was in process, work was under way on an Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, known as OPAC. The initiative began immediately after the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989, after

widespread frustration that the Convention had not explicitly outlawed the use of children for military purposes (5).

Adopted in 2000, OPAC prohibited the conscription and routine deployment of children, and outlawed their recruitment by non-state armed groups. Nonetheless, by allowing states to recruit from age 16, it stopped short of an outright ban on the use of children for military purposes. Despite strong support for the so-called ‘straight-18’ standard from many states, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the International Labour Office, the Committee on the Rights of the Child, Graça Machel, NGOs and others (1, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10), this was prevented by a small but influential group of states led by the UK and the US. At the time, both states were routinely deploying military personnel under the age of 18, and 43 per cent of British army recruits were minors at enlistment (11). Consequently, many thousands of children continue to be recruited and trained each year by state armed forces across the globe.

Meanwhile, international efforts to end the military exploitation of children have narrowed to focus on the demobilisation and reintegration of those involved in armed conflict. This is clearly justified by the severity of the impact on these children, but it has left neglected the harm caused by aspects of military employment other than combat, including the psychological impact of military training, a common culture of bullying and harassment, and the sweeping suspension of fundamental rights.

7. Since the Machel report, research has deepened understanding of the effects of armed conflict on children. Psychiatric injury is very common in children who have participated in, or closely witnessed, armed violence and other practices associated with it, such as rape and incarceration. Two-thirds of Palestinian children who had frequently witnessed military violence met the criteria for PTSD (4). It is now understood that such military-induced trauma damages the adolescent brain, retarding normal development (ibid.).



This report seeks to rekindle international attention to the harm caused by premature enlistment and so help to reinvigorate efforts to achieve a universal straight-18 standard for the benefit of all children. It presents evidence to show why recruiting and training children for military purposes is inherently and disproportionately harmful, including to those who do not participate in hostilities. The report also argues that, as currently conducted, the recruitment of children by state armed forces violates their rights and may therefore be unlawful.

In so doing, the report challenges the common assumption of a double-standard: that the military recruitment of children in poorer states of the Global South is harmful, but in economically developed democracies is not. Although the experiences of children differ, this report will show that recruiting them is invariably harmful, regardless of economic or political context. To make its case, the report focuses principally on affluent states subject to the rule of law. Almost all such countries have committed in principle not to recruit children without their consent or to routinely deploy

them into hostilities until they reach 18, yet still the evidence shows that military recruitment has a detrimental impact.

Specifically, the report outlines the growing body of evidence that the enlistment of minors in relatively affluent countries exploits adolescent susceptibilities; is unambiguously harmful to the health, wellbeing, and socioeconomic trajectories of young people; and violates their legal rights as children under the CRC and OPAC. The report concludes by showing that states can – and most do – successfully staff their armed forces entirely with adults; the recruitment of children is a political choice, not a military or demographic necessity.

The continuing recruitment of children by some affluent states has global consequences. The practice blurs what should be a red line around children's involvement in military affairs, so creating legal and ethical latitude for others to exploit. Whereas the international community has committed to the straight-18 principle in its efforts to end the use of children in armed conflict, states compromise their credibility as advocates when

their domestic practice falls short of the same standard. Child recruitment anywhere is a risk to children everywhere.

Accordingly, affluent states which recruit under the age of 18 should consider both the direct impact on their child recruits and the indirect impact of their policy in other parts of the world. States are required to cooperate towards achieving the universal implementation of OPAC⁸, and the Sustainable Development Goals oblige them to take measures to eliminate the recruitment and use of child soldiers.⁹ ■

8. OPAC art 7.

9. Sustainable Development Goal 8.7: 'Take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025 end child labour in all its forms.'

WHY 18 MATTERS

1 Socioeconomically deprived children, including in some cases those from ethnic minority or migrant backgrounds, are disproportionately targeted for recruitment.

2 Recruitment marketing misleads children by sanitising warfare in their imagination, glamorising military life, and obscuring its many risks.

3 Young people are more inclined in mid-adolescence than as adults to make choices based on emotive appeal; the ability to weigh a major decision against its long-term consequences is not yet developed.

4 As generally practised, the recruitment of children does not ensure that they are fully informed of the risks and so is not 'genuinely voluntary', as required by law.

5 Parental consent is an inadequate safeguard when the information provided to parents is incomplete or misleading, or where parents themselves have habitually neglected their child's best interests.

6 Restrictions on children's right to leave the armed forces before the age of 18 are incompatible with the legal requirement that their military employment be 'genuinely voluntary'.

7 Military training makes use of harsh discipline including humiliation and physical punishment, in order to secure the unquestioning obedience of recruits and to ensure that they will kill on demand.

8 Bullying and sexual misconduct are substantially more common in military environments than in civilian employment or education. The youngest recruits are at highest risk of victimisation.

9 Alcohol and substance misuse are substantially more common in the military than in civilian environments, including in the younger age group.

10 The military is commonly afforded exemptions from national legislation designed to safeguard the welfare and fundamental rights of children.

11 Military instructors are not normally qualified as teachers or social workers and often have no prior experience of working with vulnerable young people.

12 Research in the UK and US has found that the rate of violent offending by young people increases after military enlistment.

13 Child recruits are more likely than civilians of the same age and background, and more likely than older recruits, to have problems with mental and physical health, and self-harm (including suicide).

14 Education provided to children in armed forces training is typically more basic and narrower in focus than mainstream provision in civilian life, limiting the scope for essential academic achievement.

15 Military employment is incompatible with legislation prohibiting minors from hazardous labour ('employment that is likely to jeopardise health, safety or morals').

16 Despite many states' undertakings not to use children in hostilities, some reserve the right to do so. Even when not deployed, as military personnel they may become targets of hostile action.

17 Socioeconomic outcomes for enlisted children tend to be poorer than outcomes for demographically matched peers who did not enlist.

18 Recruitment of children by state armed forces anywhere, even if lawful, weakens protection of children everywhere against their unlawful recruitment and use.



Child Recruitment By State Armed Forces: An Overview

Canadian soldiers during a training scenario
© Cpl Jasper Schwartz/Canadian Forces

‘The question at issue is not the difference between 16, 17 and 18 years of age; the fundamental point is the distinction between children and adults. No child under 18 should be recruited into armed forces, voluntarily or otherwise.’

Mary Robinson, former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (1)

EXTENT OF CHILD RECRUITMENT

As of April 2018, 152 of the 177 states with armed forces worldwide, have ratified OPAC. Approximately two-thirds of these have also committed to the straight-18 standard: the commitment not to enlist children at all. While some of these still rely on conscripting adults to staff their armed forces, most do not.

Nonetheless, almost 50 states still rely on children to staff their armed forces. Together these countries encompass two-thirds of the world’s children, since they include the three most populous countries: China, India and the United States. Most non-straight-18 states recruit from age 17. Around 20 states are believed to allow enlistment in law from age 16, of which ten

are Commonwealth countries, including Canada, India, Pakistan, and the UK.¹⁰

Child recruitment is particularly common among economically developed states with substantial military commitments. Perhaps counterintuitively, among professional state armed forces the most affluent and technologically advanced tend to rely the most on children to make up recruit numbers. Four of the five Permanent Members of the UN Security Council still permit the enlistment of children. (Although the fifth – Russia – does not enlist children, it prescribes extensive combat training in a network of militarised schools.) Of the G7 states, only two – Japan and Italy – no longer rely on children to staff their armed forces.

The total number of children

recruited for military purposes is unknown and difficult to estimate. Since a large minority of states and at least 50 non-state armed groups are known to rely on child recruits, the number of children drawn in to military organisations annually is likely to be in the high tens of thousands at minimum. The extent of the practice in some affluent states is shown in the table on the next page.

10. As of April 2018, states believed to have a minimum enlistment age in national law/ policy of 16 years or below were Bangladesh, Brazil, Canada, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Egypt, El Salvador, Fiji, Guyana, India, Iran, Mauritania, Mexico, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Seychelles, Singapore, Tonga, Trinidad and Tobago, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, and Zambia. See www.childsoldiersworldindex.org

CHILD RECRUITMENT AND THE LAW

Several regional and international treaties relate to the recruitment of children for military purposes. Those most relevant to the issues raised in this report are highlighted below and should be considered in conjunction, since rights are independent and indivisible; those enshrined in one treaty cannot be ignored in the implementation of another. Where provisions may appear to contradict each other the higher standards of protection should always take precedence. In the context of an armed conflict where both international humanitarian law and human rights law are applicable, the most developed standards for protection of children should apply.

Convention on the Rights of the Child

Recognising the 'inherent dignity' of the human person, and the 'special care and assistance' due to children under the age of 18, the CRC has established legally-binding safeguards for their personal development, education, and employment. The CRC is binding on all states except the United States, which has yet to ratify it.

Among the rights of children recognised in the CRC are:¹²

- The right to have their best interests recognised as a primary consideration in all actions concerning them, including legislation.
- The right to freedom of thought, conscience, expression, peaceful assembly and association, and the right to be heard in 'all matters affecting them'.

- The right to a complete education that supports children's development to the 'fullest potential', and the right to be prohibited from work if it interferes with their education or development.
- The right not to be exploited for any purpose 'prejudicial to any aspects of the child's welfare'.
- The right to the 'highest attainable standard of health'. They must be safeguarded against undue injury, and from 'physical or mental violence', including sexual harassment or abuse.
- The right, when in conflict with the law, to a justice system designed specifically for minors.

12. CRC arts 3, 12, 13, 14, 18, 19, 24, 28, 29, 32, 34, 36, 37, 38, 40.

Extent of child recruitment for military purposes by affluent states: illustrative examples (2013-2017)¹¹

COUNTRY	MIN AGE	TOTAL INTAKE	INTAKE AGED UNDER 18		YEAR
			(n)	(%)	
AUSTRALIA	17	6,428	427	7%	2015
AUSTRIA	17	22,223	220	1%	2013
FRANCE	17	13,756	405	3%	2013
GERMANY	17	23,385	2,128	9%	2017
NETHERLANDS	17	1,514	82	5%	2014
NEW ZEALAND	17	428	49	11%	2016
UK	16	11,980	2,410	20%	2016
US	17	246,154	16,188	7%	2015

11. Sources: Australia, Austria, France, Netherlands, New Zealand (Letters from states to Child Soldiers International); Germany (155,233); UK (221); US (220).

TYPES OF CHILD RECRUITMENT

Child recruitment by the state armed forces examined in this report can be divided into four types:

Recruitment by conscription

Some states operating adult conscription systems (from age 18) encourage or allow children to start military service early. Austria, China, Cyprus and Mexico are examples. Children often opt for this to complete the obligation early and so minimise disruption to their education and career development. In some cases, children are offered incentives, such as privileged access to further education or a reduced minimum service period.

Recruitment for officer training

A few states recruit children in small numbers for officer training and paid-for passage through university, followed by an obligatory minimum period of adult military service. Canada operates a scheme like this. These recruits are military personnel, undergo military training, and are subject to military law. Children recruited in this way tend to be socioeconomically privileged by background.

Recruitment to the ranks

Enlistment to the ranks is the most common child recruitment practice in affluent states (including the larger Western military powers: France, the UK, and the US). Children recruited in this way typically come from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds.

The practice varies between states. In the Netherlands, a relatively small number of children aged 17 are enlisted as trainees; they can leave at any time, cannot take up a formal role in the armed forces until they turn 18, and do not continue in service thereafter unless they agree in writing to do so (143). In contrast, children in the UK are actively targeted by recruiters and enlisted in large numbers (140, 63). They may apply aged 15 and join as early

as their 16th birthday as full members of the armed forces with a designated role, which they assume as soon as they finish training (158). Child recruits to the British army have to give up to three months' notice to request discharge, cannot leave in the first six weeks, and once they turn 18 lose their right to leave for the next four years (158,159). A similar system operates in the US, where children are recruited from age 17 (125).

Recruitment through military schools

Military schools provide states with a further means of recruiting children, including in states where the enlistment age is ostensibly over 18 years. Children in military schools (who may be under 16 years of age) are not usually recognised as 'recruits' but the boundary is frequently blurred. For example, children at military schools may undergo extensive military training, be classified in law or policy as members of the armed forces, and be subject to military law. Upon graduation, they are usually obliged to complete a minimum period of formal service in the armed forces, which may last several years. Schemes such as these operate in Israel, Russia and Tajikistan.

In whatever manner children are formally recruited, they all:

- Are military personnel subject to military law, which suspends fundamental rights and includes obligations and offences that civilian law does not recognise;
- Undergo military training, which uses psychologically coercive techniques to inculcate obedience and remove instinctive barriers to violence; and
- Enter a military environment typically characterised by elevated rates of stress, physical and psychological bullying, sexual harassment, and alcohol misuse.



15 years 7 months

Minimum age to apply for enlistment into UK armed forces

Therefore, the rights of children, as guaranteed by the CRC, are violated when their recruitment for military purposes: prejudices mental or physical health; interrupts the education in which civilians of the same age typically participate; entails an elevated risk of bullying or sexual harassment, involves physical violence or is psychologically coercive; restricts the right to leave at will; limits or suspends many of the civil liberties or employment rights that civilian children enjoy; or denies them their right to a juvenile justice system.

This report will show that, by these measures, military employment violates the rights of children set out in the CRC. On this basis, child recruitment as currently practised around the world may be generally unlawful.

In its interpretation of the CRC, the Committee on the Rights of

the Child has suggested that military settings, which entail restrictions on rights and the promotion of violence as a tool, appear to be fundamentally incompatible with children's rights to an environment conducive to learning and development. (12)

Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict

OPAC stipulates that children must not be recruited unless: they are at least 16 years old;¹³ it is their 'genuinely voluntary', 'fully informed' choice; and their parents or legal guardians have given their 'informed consent'. In addition, it requires states to 'take all feasible measures' to ensure child recruits do not participate directly in hostilities until they turn 18.¹⁴

To meet these safeguards, military employers must ensure that potential recruits and their parents fully understand all

the risks and consequences of their enlistment. These include, for example: the psychological coercion of military training; the suspension of certain civil rights; the risks and legally-binding restrictions involved; and the ethical quandaries inherent in military work. They must also endeavour to ensure that children are not involved in hostilities.

13. When states ratify or accede to OPAC they must submit a declaration specifying a minimum age for enlistment into state armed forces, which must be no less than 16 years. The declaration is binding; enlistment practice is unlawful if a state recruits below the age specified. States may amend their declaration to raise the minimum enlistment age, but not to lower it.

14. OPAC arts 1, 2, 3.

15. ILO 138 art 3.

16. ILO 182 art 3.



The target audience age of magazines carrying German army adverts

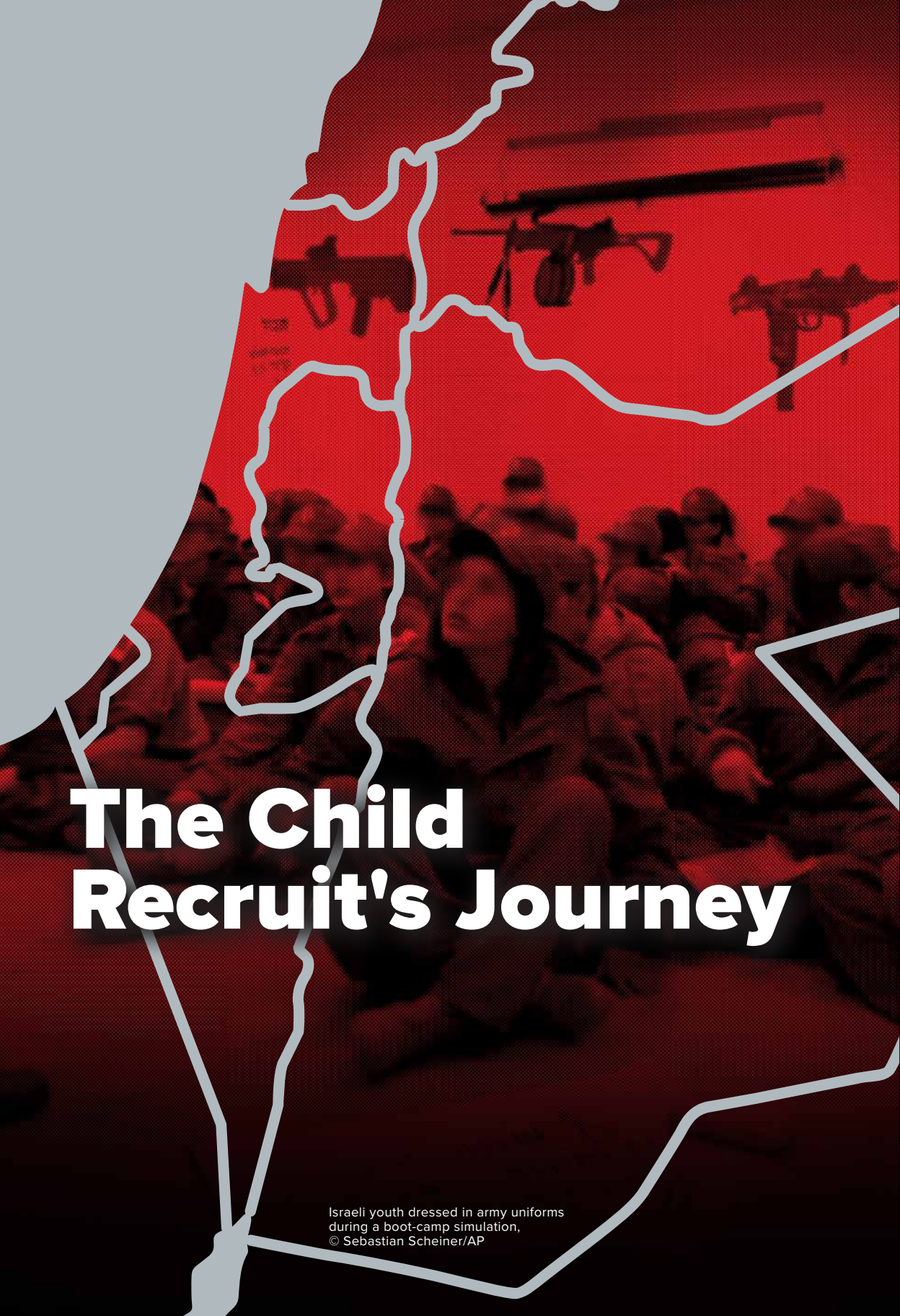
As will be explored later, information provided to child recruits and their parents typically presents military life in glamorous terms, omits its risks and difficulties, and provides perfunctory details on legal obligations. Sophisticated marketing techniques are used to exploit vulnerabilities particular to the adolescent psyche. Full details of the recruit's legal commitment are often provided only at the moment he or she signs up, with no time to analyse and absorb their implications. Often, applicants have yet to develop sufficient literacy or maturity to comprehend for themselves their complex terms of service and their lasting consequences. In these circumstances, child recruits and their parents are denied their rights under OPAC to be 'fully informed', and so their choice cannot be considered 'genuinely voluntary'.

International Labour Organisation (ILO) Conventions 138 and 182

ILO Conventions 138 (Minimum Age Convention) and 182 (Worst Forms of Child Labour) also have implications for the legality of child recruitment.

ILO 138 reserves for adulthood only 'any type of employment or work which by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out is likely to jeopardise the health, safety or morals of young persons'.¹⁵ It is left to states to determine which types of employment are 'hazardous' for the purposes of the Convention, which allows them to exempt their armed forces. The principle remains, however, that those under 18 should not be employed in hazardous work, and it is clear that military employment carries several significant hazards to the health and wellbeing of child recruits.

ILO 182 requires states to prohibit and end the worst forms of child labour, including 'forced or compulsory recruitment of children [under the age of 18] for use in armed conflict'.¹⁶ Like OPAC, ILO 182 does not prohibit 'voluntary' recruitment of children under 18, but it does reinforce that this is only permitted insofar as it is strictly voluntary. Where this is not the case, the practice violates the convention. ■



The Child Recruit's Journey

Israeli youth dressed in army uniforms
during a boot-camp simulation,
© Sebastian Scheiner/AP

‘The Committee expresses deep concern about the fact that adolescent boys and girls are being recruited, including through the use of social media, by State armed forces.’

CRC General Comment 20 on implementation of the rights of the child during adolescence. (13)

TARGETING CHILDREN FOR RECRUITMENT

The preceding section has shown how military recruitment can be harmful to children and violate their rights, even where it may be lawful in principle. Since the best interests of children must be a primary consideration, which includes regard for all their fundamental rights, states do not enjoy unlimited discretion in recruiting them for military purposes. The Committee on the Rights of the Child has repeatedly expressed concern to states which enlist large numbers of children, recommending they increase efforts to recruit adults and/or raise their enlistment age to 18 (14).¹⁷

In practice, however, many states target children as potential recruits long before they become eligible to enlist. Research by UK and US armed forces finds that most recruits commit to signing up before they are old enough to do so; and young people are less likely to join up unless they have become actively interested in military life by their mid-teens

(15, 16, 17). The former head of recruitment for the British army characterised his recruitment strategy as ‘drip, drip, drip’ from about the age of seven (18). The US Army’s ‘School Recruiting Program Handbook’, instructs recruiters to target children below the minimum enlistment age because ‘if you wait until they’re seniors, it’s probably too late’ (234). In Australia, children can register their details from the age of 10 with Defence Jobs Membership to receive recruitment information and news from the armed forces (20).

Germany’s main newspaper for schoolchildren runs advertisements for the armed forces in most editions. Armed forces ‘Adventure Camps’ for children aged 16 and above are advertised in an online teen magazine for children aged from 10 years (21), while online marketing is targeted at 14–17-year-olds, who are invited to play online games linked to recruitment (22). The advertising does not mention risk, death or injury, focusing instead on ‘good training, promotion prospects, comradeship and plenty of

adventure’ (21). In defence of this approach, a spokesperson stated that ‘the German armed forces did not broach the issue of overseas military missions in their advertising just like advertising for chocolate does not mention the risk of getting fat’ (21).¹⁸ Experts testifying to the German parliamentary committee criticised this as ‘false advertising’:

‘In view of what is involved in the military profession, the potential to be killed and all the dangers associated with this, this is irresponsible to young people and in no way fulfills the protective function and the protection mandate which the Bundeswehr as a parliamentary army ultimately has.’ (22)

17. CRC art 38 also imposes a legal obligation on states which continue to recruit children ‘to give priority to those who are oldest’ amongst them.

18. In contrast, producers of tobacco and alcohol are required to advertise their health risks, and nutritionists have called for this to be extended to junk food.

‘Furthermore, the Committee is concerned that the ADF active targeting of schools for recruits through ‘work experience programs’ may unduly put pressure on young persons, especially from marginalised populations and from different linguistic backgrounds to volunteer, without full informed consent.’

CRC Concluding Observations: Australia 2012 (27)

SOCIOECONOMIC TARGETING

In seeking child applicants, it is usual for recruiters to focus on economically depressed areas where employment opportunities are limited (23). Described as ‘skilled salesmen’ by the former head of recruitment for the British army (18), recruiters promote enlistment to disadvantaged youth as a gateway to personal power, social purpose, camaraderie, and socioeconomic mobility. The army promises to put money in children’s pockets: ‘Age 16? Earn over £1,000 a month while you train’ [\$1,300] – and congratulates its new 16-year-old recruits for earning more than their civilian friends who stay in college to enhance their qualifications (24,25). The 2017 army recruitment drive, entitled ‘This is belonging’, was targeted specifically at 16-24 year-olds from families with an average annual income of £10,000 [\$13,000] (26). In Israel, an extracurricular military training programme targets socioeconomically deprived children, promising social mobility and a better quality of life through skills acquired in military service (29).

Concerns have been raised in some countries about targeting of ethnic minority children for recruitment. The Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children has protested the targeting of economically deprived aboriginal youth through advertising on aboriginal and multilingual television stations (28). The proportion of New Zealand armed forces personnel who identify as Maori is double that in the general population.¹⁹ In the US, about half of participants in the main school cadet programme, the JROTC, are reportedly people of colour (19). In Chicago, 93 per cent of JROTC cadets are African American or Latino, and more than 70 per cent of JROTC programmes are in high schools located in post code districts with predominantly African American or Latino populations (236). Young African American males are over-represented among new armed forces recruits, particularly in the army.²⁰ Reports indicate that some young Latinos who enlist do so in the hope of helping relatives with irregular immigration status (19). Similarly, in Israel a programme specifically for unaccompanied migrant children encourages

them to enlist. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) are presented as ‘a major socialising framework for those who wish to stay and become citizens’, and includes inducements such as help with obtaining a high school diploma and driving licence (29). Practices such as these disregard the clear recommendations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child to ensure that military recruiting efforts do not exploit children from marginalised or vulnerable groups.

19. In 2012, 30 per cent of the New Zealand Defence Force identified as Maori, versus 15 per cent in the general population in 2013 (222,214).

20. As of 2014, 19 per cent of the US armed forces intake identified as black non-Hispanic, versus 16 per cent in the general population; the greatest disparity was seen in the army (215).

21. The significance of cadets’ use of military uniforms and insignia should not be underestimated, as under international humanitarian law this is one of the factors distinguishing lawful combatants from civilians.



German army at Gamescom, the world's largest trade fair for video and computer games, © Jochen Tack / Alamy

FANTASY MARKETING

Recruiters frequently associate military life with the idealised warrior-hero of action films and videogames. In the US, scenes from Hollywood blockbusters (including *Behind Enemy Lines* and *X-Men: First Class*) have been spliced into military advertising. In Israel, the UK and the US, recruiters encourage children to play officially scripted videogames which conflate a fantasy narrative with real military life (31, 32). In the US, for example, young children are offered the chance to sit at a drone operator's console and simulate attacks in Afghanistan, as if it were a game, and play the army's official 3D virtual reality videogame (33). In a similar vein, children aged 13–15 visiting a military training site in Germany were told that the shooting simulator 'was a thousand times better than any game on your console at home' (34).

Conversely, a selling point of war-based videogames is the realism of their first-person-perspective. To reach the younger market, however, game designers strip any graphic brutality from the violence they depict. When military life is compared favourably to these games, children are encouraged

'The Committee... recommends that the State party... [p]rohibit all forms of advertising campaigns for the German armed forces targeting children.'

CRC Concluding Observations: Germany 2014 (30)

to assume that a soldier's life is one of intense excitement with no moral ambiguity, gore or trauma.

Despite the fanciful nature of action adventure films and videogames, the British army's research has found that they inspire many younger recruits to sign up (16). It is a striking irony that the same children are barred from seeing graphic portrayals of warfare in certain films and documentaries, which are rated for adults only due to their disturbingly realistic depictions of mass violence and the suffering it causes. *The Deer Hunter* and the documentary *Cry Freetown* are examples. Perhaps most strikingly of all, in 2016 a British television channel broadcast a four-part documentary series following 16- and 17-year-old army recruits through initial training. To watch the series online, viewers had to tick a box confirming they were over 18 years of age as the content was considered unsuitable for younger viewers (241).

CADET FORCES

Military youth organisations such as cadet forces, many of which are embedded in schools, step up the state's engagement with children once they reach adolescence. With their participation usually subsidised by the Ministry of Defence children in cadet forces typically wear military-style uniforms and many undertake weapons training.²¹ The uniform is one of many ways in which cadet systems immerse children in a simulacrum of military life, in which the soldier's role is dissociated from its risks and moral ambiguities. Despite this, research has found that children's repeated exposure to cadet systems plays an important role in their later choice to enlist (16).

Canadian and US cadet systems offer scholarships and other financial incentives. For example, Canadian cadets can be awarded a scholarship of up to \$5,000 for

post-secondary education, and are offered small payments for participating in marksmanship courses on summer camps (237). In the US, the Department of Defense encourages contact between cadet instructors and military recruiters (19).

The 'Follow Me' ('Aharai') military training programme in Israel is run by a civilian organisation in collaboration with the Ministry of Defence and high-ranking officers (29). The initiative is targeted at young people in underprivileged areas, promising to enhance participants' social mobility (29).

RECRUITING IN SCHOOLS

The Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups state that:

'Measures must be taken to prevent propaganda or active recruitment taking place in or around schools and to protect children in the school environment.'²²

Yet the education system remains a major site for the direct and indirect recruitment of children. Recruiters commonly visit schools with military hardware ranging from rifles to attack helicopters, and teachers are encouraged to take their class on free away-days with the armed forces (18, 21, 35, 36, 37). In some countries, such as Germany and the US, the armed forces have a legal right of access to all children's contact details, which are sent automatically to recruiters (21, 22, 39). Thereafter, all children nearing enlistment age receive military marketing materials.

The US army describes schools as the 'cornerstone' of its recruitment strategy (38). In 2015, 1,021 schools in the US

required 47,360 children to take the ASVAB (military aptitude) test, without seeking the child's or parents' consent (239). Recruiters, who have a legal right of access (39), are instructed to be 'so entrenched in the school scene that the Army is in constant demand' (38). In some areas, soldiers become a daily presence in the lives of American children, riding the school bus, turning up at school dances, and coaching sports teams after hours (37).

In the UK, the armed forces make over 11,000 school visits each year (40). The army's main schools presentation shows soldiers scuba-diving but not at war (41). The Ministry of Defence provides teachers with curricular aids presenting a glossy history of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and schools can win additional funding for adopting a 'military ethos' or starting a cadet group (41,42,43).

Similar arrangements apply in Australia, where secondary schools receive visits from armed forces career teams to 'provide information to potential candidates and influencers' (44), and in Canada, where high school students are encouraged to attend navy recruiting events at their schools (238).

In Israel, military culture is embedded in the education system. Uniformed soldiers are present in state-run schools, often teaching classes even when they are not qualified to do so (29). Conversely, many teachers, and especially those in management positions, are former ranking military officers, and do not always have teaching qualifications. 'Youth Guides' are stationed in schools by the armed forces to encourage young people to enlist. Most high schools also incorporate compulsory 'youth battalions

training' into the curriculum, which entails a week of military training for children aged 15–17 at a military site, including the use of semiautomatic weapons (29). There is also a wider, compulsory school-based military curriculum for children in years 10 – 12, intended to prepare them for conscription and promote a positive perception of the military.

While most military visits are at secondary level, primary schools are also visited. In New Zealand, the army takes assault rifles into primary schools and teaches children to assemble the weapons and hold them in the fire position (45). According to one 11-year-old student, holding an assault rifle for the first time felt 'amazing and cool ... it'll just be something that's imprinted on your brain' (45). A corporal involved in one such visit commented, 'The kids just love the guns, you know what kids are like... Most of the children's questions were about the kit, not what the higher ideas are.' (45)

Even kindergartens can become a site for soft recruitment, based on symbolically militarised activities. In Israel, military personnel can join kindergarten 'graduation' ceremonies, which include parades performed by the soldiers and children together (29). Kindergarten children are also taken to visit military bases. Sahar Vardi remembers:

'In kindergarten you bring gifts to soldiers. And then later there's worksheets to teach children how to count: you have on one hand the numbers 1 to 10, and on the other different numbers of symbols like tanks and aeroplanes. You have to join them up.' (46)

'The Committee is concerned that children who study in military schools have military status and... are subject to the Military Code of Justice.'

CRC Concluding Observations: Mexico 2011 (47)

MILITARY SCHOOLS

In addition to military activities inside civilian schools, in many countries some schools are run by, or in conjunction with, the Ministry of Defence or armed forces. OPAC permits this, but only if the schools comply with the detailed requirements for children's education laid out in the CRC's articles 28 and 29.²³ These include education on human rights and humanitarian principles, and the prohibition of degrading punishments.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child has further indicated that a military institution would not qualify as a 'school' where:

- Children are categorised as military personnel under military legislation or other statute and/or can be mobilised in case of national emergency (48, 49).
- Children are subject to military law (47).
- Children have a legal liability for formal military service upon graduation (47).
- Children are not permitted to leave the institution at will, and/or their initial enrolment at the institution is compulsory (47).
- Military training and activities dominate the curriculum to the detriment of subjects normally studied by children of the same age group in civilian life (50).

Such conditions are detrimental to the wellbeing of children for many of the same reasons as formal recruitment, and can be tantamount to military enlistment by the back door. As the examples

below show, the parameters of 'military' and 'school' are often blurred in practice, leading to the de facto recruitment and/or military training of children below the recognised national minimum age of enlistment.

In the Netherlands, several military-vocational training programmes are available in civilian schools as a study option for children from the age of 15 years, 6 months (51). One, the Security and Craftsmanship course lasting between 18 and 48 months, is designed as a preparation for military employment, and includes one week per month at a military site (51). Students who complete the course have a shorter basic training programme once they join the military. Many of the instructors are current or former military officers, supplied by the Ministry of Defence. Former students have described being subjected to harsh discipline and abuse:

'One time, during military self-defense, we were blindfolded. The military instructor passed us by and beat people up, punching them in the stomach. Why? Just so we are in pain. He thinks that's funny.' (51)

In Canada, officer cadets from age 16 are paid to study at university; they must render five years' service as officers afterwards, or re-pay their fees and bursary in full (52). Until 2014, when the law was changed, students at military schools in Mexico were subject to military law, and had to serve in the armed forces as adult conscripts for at least twice

the period spent in the school (47). Students in these schools also participated in operations to combat drug trafficking.

The UK's Defence Sixth Form College is a fee-paying pre-military school managed by the Ministry of Defence; school fees and the subsequent university bursary are waived on condition that students complete at least three years' service as an officer after graduation (53).

Military-operated schools are common in Russia. In many of these institutions, children are required to undergo military training exercises as part of the curriculum from the age of 10 (46, 54). Russia also runs a system of 'military training colleges' for children from age 16, in which a third of the curriculum is devoted to military practices. (54)

In Israel, some military high schools admit children from the age of 13 (29). Children typically wear military uniform, undergo military training including the use of firearms, and study a curriculum designed as a preparation for later military employment. Staff are usually military personnel and some schools are located on military bases. The stated aim of the Military Boarding School of Command, for example, is to train officers for the army; children have a career plan laid out for them upon enrolment which extends beyond graduation. Students at the Air Force Technical schools have a commitment to serve in the Air Force upon graduation. Students on military vocational courses at the Amal High School carry out work at the air base, for which they are employed and paid by the military (29).

22. Principle 6.26.1.

23. By extension, military schools should also comply with the Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment No.1: 'The aims of education'.



An Australian recruit during a training exercise
© Sgt Rachel Ingram/Commonwealth of Australia

ENLISTMENT AND CONSENT

OPAC requires that any military recruitment of children is 'genuinely voluntary', recruits are 'fully informed', and their parents or legal guardians have given their 'informed consent'.²⁴ To meet these requirements, military employers must ensure that potential recruits and their parents fully understand the consequences of their enlistment. These include, for example: the risks and legally-binding restrictions involved; the lasting psychological impact of military training; the suspension of certain civil rights; and the ethical quandaries inherent in military work.

In particular, the putatively voluntary nature of child recruitment depends on two conditions, which must be met consistently:

- That recruits have the psychological capacity required to comprehend the

nature of military employment in full, including its potential consequences, and are free from undue external influence or other coercive conditions.

- That comprehensive information is provided to recruits and their parents which fully informs them of the nature of military employment, including its risks, hardships, legal obligations, and rights.

Decision Making Biases in Adolescence

Recent neuroscientific and psychosocial research has improved understanding of the developmental needs and vulnerabilities of adolescent children. Adolescence — approximately between ages 10 and 20 — is an exploratory period, when young people begin to understand their world on their own terms and make their mark on it. Psychologists have described this transition as

a 'window of vulnerability', when rapid and complex changes in the brain affect decision-making and responses to stress (55).

The Committee on the Rights of the Child has reflected this in its General Comment on health in adolescence, noting that:

'Adolescence is a period characterised by rapid physical, cognitive and social changes... the gradual building up of the capacity to assume adult behaviours and roles... adolescence also poses new challenges to health and development owing to... relative vulnerability and pressure from society.' (56)

Consequently, states have an obligation under the CRC to have regard to adolescents' particular vulnerabilities, including by taking 'effective measures to ensure that adolescents are protected from all forms of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation' (56). Targeting

‘The lure of ideology is particularly strong in early adolescence, when young people are developing personal identities and searching for a sense of social meaning.’

Graça Machel, Impact of armed conflict on children (2)

adolescents for recruitment is incompatible with this duty insofar as military employment is characterised by harsh discipline including physical punishments, and an elevated rate of bullying.

In affluent countries, the primary target group for recruitment are children in mid-adolescence. Two vulnerabilities are salient when children of this age are recruited: a heightened susceptibility to emotive persuasion; and an underdeveloped capacity for complex decision-making.

Susceptibility to Emotive Persuasion in Mid-Adolescence

Compared with adults, children in mid-adolescence are more susceptible to persuasion by marketing messages based on emotive appeal (57, 58). They are also more self-conscious, and their sense of self is malleable under external influence (57, 59).²⁵

Crucially, the stressful conditions of an economically deprived background, which is typical of many enlistees, amplify this bias in adolescent decision-making. That is, young people who experience daily stress are markedly more likely than relatively unstressed individuals to make choices based on emotive appeal without rational evaluation (55, 60, 61, 62).

Whether knowingly or not, military marketing capitalises on the adolescent’s impressionable search for an effective mature identity. In particular, by associating military roles

with a traditionally masculine warrior who saves but never hurts, marketing messages appear to promise a fast track to adulthood, characterised by power, attractiveness, belonging, and purpose (63, 64, 65, 66, 67). For example, an American army slogan is ‘There’s strong. Then there’s army strong’. Similarly, the Israeli infantryman is ‘discovering all your strengths’; the Russian is ‘beyond fear’, working for the ‘safety’ of others (68, 69, 70); the British is ‘harder, faster, fitter, stronger’, ‘helping people’, and has a deeper sense of belonging than a civilian (71, 72).

Researchers at the University of Tübingen told a parliamentary committee that such slogans target the psychological insecurities of young people, presenting the armed forces ‘as a solution to problems and deficits which young people might experience in adolescence’ (22). For the same reasons, British public health experts have criticised military marketing as ‘designed to appeal to adolescent decision-making biases’ (59).

Capacity for Complex Decision-Making in Mid-Adolescence

Public health experts have argued that changes in the brain during adolescence are likely to incline younger people to enlist without critical awareness of what military life involves (17,59).

In this respect, two structures in the brain are particularly important (55). The first is a

socio-emotional system in the limbic region, which develops in younger childhood and drives short-term, emotionally-driven, reward-oriented behaviour, including sensation-seeking and risky actions. A second structure, a cognitive system in the prefrontal cortex, provides the capacity to anticipate the consequences of choices over the long term, and so regulate emotionally driven behaviour. This cognitive control system develops relatively late in adolescence (55). Until it does, young people are more inclined to take risks to explore the world around them, but remain susceptible to making complex, consequential choices unwisely.

Certain functions in the brain’s cognitive control system which are critical for complex decision-making, such as long-term planning and the capacity to defer gratification, only begin to develop from around age 16 (55, 73). For this reason, it is more difficult for a young person at 16, than as an adult, to weigh the potential down-sides of an appealing career option. The developmentally limited ability to make consequential decisions is particularly marked among those living in conditions of stress (55, 60, 61, 62).

24. OPAC art 3.

25. In particular, adolescents can struggle to distinguish ‘identity’ from ‘role’: who a person is appears to be defined by the job a person does, so it can appear that adult maturity is achieved by doing the job one associates with it (59).

Literacy in Mid-Adolescence

The underdeveloped literacy of many child applicants further prejudices their capacity to make an informed choice about enlistment. Literacy is critical for complex decisions, particularly when far-reaching legal obligations, which suspend certain fundamental rights, are involved.

Three-quarters of the British army's 16-year-old recruits have the literacy normally expected of a child aged 11 or less, and some have a reading age as low as five (74). These recruits would be unable to read and comprehend for themselves the technicalities of the written enlistment papers, which are typically provided to recruits only at the point of signing.

Recruitment Information

As noted earlier, in signing up for military employment, child recruits commit themselves to absolute control by the state, accept limitations to some fundamental civil and political rights, and face a markedly increased long-term occupational risk of serious injury or death. Child recruits enter a legally binding contract, the terms of which could not be imposed lawfully on a civilian of any age in most economically developed countries. If potential recruits are to be 'fully informed' before they enlist, they are entitled to be told without equivocation of these risks and obligations.

In practice, even once the formal process of recruitment has begun, evidence from several countries shows that recruiters continue to present military life in glamorous terms, omit its risks and difficulties, and sanitise warfare in the applicant's imagination. For example,

British recruitment brochures are described as 'guides' to military life, but they omit the full terms of service and include no information to support a child to form a balanced view of military life (76). The brochure provided to potential young recruits to the army's 'junior entry' training site (for soldiers aged 16–17.5) does not mention any risks or legal obligations, nor does it mention that a third of the youngest enlistees leave or are dismissed during training,²⁶ or explain that child recruits cannot leave the army for four years from the day they turn 18 (76). It emphasises sport and recreational opportunities, and does not include the words 'armed conflict', 'war', 'death', 'kill' or 'injury'.

Children in the Australian armed forces interviewed by the Commonwealth and Defence Force Ombudsman 'commented on the poor quality of advice provided at recruiting interviews' and 'complained that the information given to them about life in the military was unrealistic, focusing only on exciting aspects' (77).

In some cases, recruiters lie. In 2006, US recruiters were caught telling school students that 'the US was not at war' and

'that recruits could just leave the military after enlistment if they didn't like it' (78). In 2005 the US Government Accountability Office reported that recruiter irregularities were frequent; 20 per cent of recruiters themselves agreed (78).²⁷

Unlike the duty of care required of medical professionals when working with children (see 'Legal Standards of Consent', p. 28), military recruiters are not accountable to the ethics of impartiality and may be incentivised by recruitment quotas. Their role is to influence a child to enlist.

In combination, the risks and legal obligations that follow enlistment; the superficial and misleading nature of recruitment marketing; and the developmental vulnerabilities of adolescence, mitigate against an assumption of informed consent when child recruits are enlisted. That is to say, when the choice to enlist is difficult to reverse; when recruitment marketing is misleading; and/or when enlistees are not yet sufficiently mature to make consequential decisions responsibly, the armed forces deny their recruits the right to be sure that enlisting is in their own interests.

'In addition to being forcibly recruited, youth also present themselves for service. It is misleading, however, to consider this voluntary. While young people may appear to choose military service, the choice is not exercised freely. They may be driven by any of several forces, including cultural, social, economic or political pressures.'

Graca Machel, *Impact of armed conflict on children* (2)

Parental Consent

As a safeguard, recruiters must also obtain the informed consent of parents, but many of the same problems apply. Parents are often only peripherally involved in the recruitment process and may not be involved at all if the child is under the care of the state. Like their child, parents are provided only with material intended to promote a military career rather than provide objective and comprehensive information. Consequently, they may be no better placed than their child to appreciate the consequences of enlistment in full.

In the UK, recruiters are not obliged to meet or call parents at any point (79,80). Instead, they give potential recruits a guide for their parents, which is silent on the risks and obligations of military life, and the consent form is usually processed by post (81). Parents of child recruits have reported great reluctance to sign consent forms, and in some cases only did so for fear of their child running away from home or, in the case of separated parents, seeking a transfer of custody (82).²⁸ One mother, whose son subsequently died in training, described the feeling that she had 'signed my own son's death warrant' on the day she consented to his enlistment (82).

Although the Australian Defence Force now 'widely acknowledges that it stands in "*loco parentis*" regarding recruits under the age of 18',²⁹ the Commonwealth and Defence Force Ombudsman in Australia has noted that both children and parents have been confused about the nature of the armed forces' legal responsibility towards minors:

'There was little understanding or agreement about what might be regarded as acceptable

'The Committee remains concerned that... [s]afeguards for voluntary recruitment are insufficient, particularly in the light of the very low literacy level of the majority of under-18 recruits and the fact that briefing materials provided to child applicants and their parents or guardians do not clearly inform them of the risks and obligations that follow their enlistment.'

CRC Concluding Observations: United Kingdom 2016 (75)

expectations of them, or behaviour towards them, as minors... This confusion has caused great distress for some parents, particularly for those who have not understood that the ADF [Australia Defence Force] would not always be supervising their child's non-training activities.' (77) In such cases, the parental consent obtained by recruiters cannot be considered 'fully informed', as required by OPAC.

In many countries, recruiters market military careers to children without parental consent, such as in schools and online. In Germany and the US, children's personal details are supplied to military recruiters without the express consent of parents (21, 39). In some instances families have complained to school authorities for failing to notify them of the right to opt out (37, 78). Evidently, these cases reveal not only an absence of parents' informed consent, but also their active opposition (78).

Once given, parental consent to enlistment cannot always be revoked. In the UK, for example, withdrawal of parental consent after enlistment can result in termination of a minor's service in the armed forces, but only

at the discretion of the chain of command (84); parents have no legal right to withdraw consent after enlistment.

Some states reserve the right to waive the requirement for parental consent altogether.

26. British army intake of minors, 2008-09 to 2012-13 inclusive: 15,395; of whom dropped out during training: 5,310 (34.5%). Adult intake, same period: 41,480; of whom dropped out during training: 9,700 (23.4%). (212,221).

27. The report defined 'recruiter irregularities' as 'wilful and unwilful acts of omission and improprieties perpetrated by a recruiter to facilitate the recruitment process for an applicant, including coercion, falsification of documents giving false promises, failing to disclose disqualifying eligibility criteria, and sexual harassment'. Between 2004 and 2005, 6,600 allegations of such irregularities were recorded, of which 630 were later substantiated and 68 involved criminal violations.

28. In the UK, a child living with only one parent does not need the formal consent of the other parent, which can incentivise a child intent on enlisting to live with whichever parent is more willing to allow the enlistment to take place (82).

29. Communication from Australian Government Department of Defence.

In New Zealand and the US, 17-year-olds can be recruited into the armed forces without parental consent if they are, or ever have been, married (85, 86).³⁰ In the UK, a child can be enlisted without the consent of a parent or guardian if none can be found (87).

'VOLUNTARY' CONSCRIPTION OF CHILDREN

OPAC requires that 'States Parties shall ensure that persons who have not attained the age of 18 years are not compulsorily recruited into their armed forces.'³¹ In fact, some states which operate adult conscription from age 18 allow 17-year-olds to opt to begin their compulsory service early (e.g. Austria, Cyprus, Israel). When children choose this, it is usually to limit disruption that conscripted service causes to their post-secondary education and civilian career plans. The Austrian government describes its early conscription arrangements as a 'service', allowing those who finish school aged 17 to find employment in the year before adult conscription would begin (88).³²

Where citizens are liable for conscription from age 18, a pragmatic decision to bring this forward – possibly under pressure from parents or teachers – cannot be considered 'genuinely voluntary' recruitment. In light of the recent death of an Austrian conscript in training (see 'The Military Training Process' p. 29), and the allegations of widespread abuse and bullying (see 'Sexual violence, assault and harassment' p. 37), it is also questionable whether children can, or should be allowed, to give consent to expose themselves to such risks.

LEGAL STANDARDS OF CONSENT

The standards of consent used for the military enlistment of minors differ markedly from those established by the medical profession, which recognises that a child's wish to pursue a risky course of action does not itself imply his or her informed consent. The profession appreciates that a person is less able as a child than as an adult to provide consent, and more vulnerable to any consequential harm.

In Australia, New Zealand, and the UK, the law requires that children under 16 can only consent to medical treatment if they have achieved (as worded in British law) 'sufficient understanding and intelligence... to understand fully what is proposed' (Gillick vs. West Norfolk). This principle is commonly known as Gillick Competence and is a pre-requisite for genuinely informed consent.

Health professionals must ensure that a child patient is fully aware of the risks of treatment, has the maturity to comprehend them sufficiently in his or her own interest, and is not under persuasive pressure (208). The child must also retain the freedom to withdraw consent at any point.

By these standards, informed consent to a course of action has four components:

- Full comprehension of the benefits and risks;
- Sufficient maturity and intelligence to evaluate the probable consequences over time;
- Freedom from the persuasive influence of others; and
- Freedom to withdraw consent.

In contrast, some or all of these conditions are typically absent when children are recruited into state armed forces, despite the substantial risks and obligations involved.

As noted, an essential requisite of genuine consent is the freedom to withdraw it. Yet children who have opted to begin their conscription early can be compelled to remain in service against their will, which amounts to the forced recruitment of minors, and is prohibited by OPAC article 2. In Israel, for example, children can opt for early conscription at age 17. At this point they become subject to the full force of military law, as if they had been conscripted as adults, and have no right to leave until they complete their service (36 months for men, 24 months

for women) (89). The same applies in Cyprus, where 17-year-old 'voluntary' conscripts cannot discharge themselves 'regardless of any change of opinion either by him or his parents' (90).

30. The minimum age for marriage in New Zealand is 16 years, with parental consent. There is no minimum age for marriage in many US states.

31. OPAC art 2.

32. It should be noted that there is an alternative civil service in Austria that can be chosen instead of military service, including for those who start their national service early (before age 18).



© Austrian Armed Forces

THE MILITARY TRAINING PROCESS

Obedience by Coercion

Military training is a coercive process. It makes use of sustained stress and harsh discipline, including physical and psychological violence, in preparation for the violence of armed conflict (see 'Army Training Methods,' p. 32).

Training practices are widely shared between economically developed states, with some variation between the army, navy and air force, and between recruitment for officers and for the ranks. Stressors, such as the denial of sleep and comfort, and humiliations, are routine. The right to contact civilian friends and family is normally denied or tightly restricted. The training regime controls every aspect of daily life; trainers demand obedience in every detail and any mistake is punished. To ensure that recruits will kill on demand, adrenalised aggression is stimulated repeatedly, and

their opponents in war are depersonalised as 'targets', which will 'fall when hit' (63). Whereas a civilian has the right to complain or leave their job at will, a recruit who leaves without permission is arrested and returned to training, even if still under the age of 18 (21, 81). In contrast, the army may dismiss any recruit at any time and for any reason.

A 2017 report from the UK which draws on over 200 studies of army training from the last half-century, mainly from the UK and US, characterises initial training as a process of psychological conditioning, which ensures that recruits obey all orders by reflex, enables them to kill other people, and secures their loyalty to the military system (63). It shows that initial military training can have a profound impact on the mind, altering fundamental beliefs and habitual behaviours and leading to lasting problems with mental health and re-adjustment to civilian life. It identifies specific

changes in the psyche that the training process aims to effect:

'A healthy person's innate aversion to killing other people must be dulled, as must the natural tendency to appraise a course of action on its merits before committing to it. To ensure that the military group will work as a unit, personal individuality must be suppressed and loyalties realigned until recruits assume military culture as their own and accept the supremacy of its demands. In sum, the military expects to gain dominance over their thoughts, feelings, and behaviour.' (63)

The training process has been described by US military officers with expertise in military training as 'intense indoctrination' under sustained stress (92).³³ A former Austrian conscript explained that '[the army] is violent anyway. It is all about discipline, and breaking human beings and re-shaping them.' (93)

Since the capacity of adolescents for rational evaluation and decision-making is compromised in conditions of high stress (59, 60), initial military training capitalises on a specific developmental vulnerability to re-shape their attitudes and behaviours for military use.

Obedience Through Violence

The CRC obligates states to 'take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child'.³⁴

There are no exceptions to this duty; no form of legalised violence against children is permitted. In elaborating what this means in practice, the Committee on the Rights of the Child has clarified that states are required to 'take the necessary actions to prevent and prohibit all forms of violence and abuse, including sexual abuse, corporal punishment and other inhuman, degrading or humiliating treatment or punishment in school, by school personnel as well as among students' (56).

The Committee's condemnation of corporal punishment has been repeated in judgements of the European Court of Human

Rights, the European Committee of Social Rights, and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (94).

However, military training regimes routinely incorporate – either as a formalised aspect of training techniques or informally as part of the wider military environment – most of the forms of violence explicitly prohibited in CRC article 19, including:

- Psychological maltreatment, mental abuse, verbal abuse and emotional abuse.
- Scaring, terrorising and threatening.
- Insults, name-calling, humiliation, belittling, and ridiculing.
- Psychological bullying and hazing³⁵ by adults or other children.
- Corporal punishment, including hitting, punching, kicking, and stress positions.
- Physical bullying and hazing.

A former Austrian conscript described his experience of entering military training:

'The first day at the Bundesheer [army] was terrible. After we got our things, we were told to get into buses. No one told us where we were going. They shouted at us and said we should keep our mouths shut and look straight ahead, no one was allowed to smoke or look at his cell phone. We were driven to Horn. I will never forget the arrival...

'The mood was depressed, and no one spoke to each other, and they ordered us to stand in line. It was late in the evening, we had 10 minutes to prepare the room, and then had three or four hours of lessons. We were all very tired and some were asleep. Those who were asleep had to spend the rest of the time standing. They even slept while standing.

'After the class, my mother called me. I couldn't stop myself from crying when I heard her voice, although I was already 21 then.

'After a few weeks you get used to the everyday life. You get up, stand in line, get screamed at and cursed, have to stand, sometimes eight hours... You just have to get used to the fact that you are always screamed at and humiliated.' (93)

33. 'The intense workload and sleep restriction experienced by military recruits leaves them little attention capacity for processing the messages they receive about new norms... Therefore, recruits should be less likely to devote their remaining cognitive effort to judging the quality of persuasive messages and will be more likely to be persuaded by the messages...' (92) Other military officers and academics have characterised initial training as 're-socialisation', 'assimilation', 'psychological conditioning', 'programming', and simply 'control' (63)

34. CRC art 19.

35. 'Hazing' is defined as 'rituals and other activities involving harassment, violence or humiliation which are used as a way of initiating a person into a group' (96).

‘Once recruited as soldiers, children generally receive much the same treatment as adults – including the often brutal induction ceremonies.’

Graca Machel, Impact of armed conflict on children (2)

Although this individual was aged 21 at the time, 17-year-olds who opt to be conscripted early go through the same regime.

Wayne Sharrocks, who enlisted for the British infantry at age 17 in 2006, describes similar experiences:

‘If you get called into the office you don’t know if you’re going to get punched or made to do press-ups or humiliated – they’ll think nothing of humiliating you in front of everybody, just for a laugh, or brutally punishing you until you’re sick. These are all things they use to make you stay in line...

‘Bayonet training is teaching you to kill a person with a blade on the end of a rifle. You’ll be put through loads of physical punishments – you’re crawling through mud, screamed at and shouted at, kicked, punched while you’re on the floor, anything to get you angry – they want you to release this insane amount of aggression, enough to stab another man when they say, basically, on the flick of a switch.’³⁶ (63)

Routine basic training for the British army parachute regiment includes an exercise called ‘milling’. According to army policy documents, ‘[m]illing consists of 60 seconds of controlled aggression, whereby two opponents of equal size and weight, wearing head guards, gum shields and 18oz boxing gloves... aim to dominate [their] opponent with straight punches

to the head. No ducking, parrying or other boxing defence moves are allowed.’ (95) In other words, recruits, who may be only 17 years old at the time, must withstand being repeatedly punched in the head and face for one minute in order to progress in training. Graphic footage of milling exercises can be found online.³⁷

Children enrolled on military-vocational courses in the Netherlands undergo much of the same basic military training as adult recruits, despite having not formally enlisted (51). ‘Military self-defence’ training forms a significant part of all the vocational courses, some of which is carried out on military bases. One child (enrolled in the course for children aged 15 years, 6 months) reported:

‘We are often being belittled to see whether we can take it. During running exercises, all of a sudden they [instructors] are running right behind you and start screaming “God-damn it, asshole” or “Son of a bitch, run harder!” and then they push you in the neck.’

Students commonly described the training as including ‘scaring students, screaming at students, belittlement of students, combined with sleep deprivation, physical exhaustion and food deprivation’ (51).

In Australia, a report by the Commonwealth and Defence Ombudsman into the care of minors in the armed forces

noted ‘the tension between Army’s acknowledged training objective – to produce soldiers who are tough and can cope – and the need to protect and encourage more vulnerable, younger soldiers as they develop these capacities’ (77). Army staff advised the Ombudsman that ‘soldiers are trained to kill face-to-face and must be able to do their jobs efficiently in hardship conditions... Soldiers, according to Army [sic], are expected to be able to cope with more and they need to get used to this early.’ Some also commented that ‘if minors did feel uncomfortable or confused, that was simply part of the process of being “acculturated” into the military... this was the only way for training to be effective.’

As these remarks indicate, the conflict between the needs and priorities of the armed forces as an institution and minors as individuals in need of ‘special care’³⁸ will always be problematic, and appears to be irreconcilable. At the least, such violent methods are unambiguously incompatible with states’ ‘immediate and unqualified obligation’ to eliminate the violent and humiliating treatment of children (96).

36. Other examples of ill-treatment during British army training are published in The First Ambush report (63).

37 For example, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YR2ZARY6SoE>) (accessed 28 October 2017).

38. CRC preamble and art 1.

ARMY TRAINING METHODS

Based on research focused on the British and US armed forces (63), the training of army recruits, including those aged under 18, can be understood in three parts:

1 Recruits are 'stripped' of their civilian identities and dominated by the army's demands:

Civilian ties are suppressed. For the first few weeks, all contact with civilian friends and family is prohibited or heavily restricted and recruits are not allowed to leave the military estate.

Individuality is suppressed. Most obviously, all recruits must wear the same uniform, but also the head is shaved, the use of first names is forbidden, and time and space for privacy are denied.

Personal affairs are controlled. The army controls every aspect of recruits' behaviour, from how they stand to how they fold a t-shirt. Any minor deviation is punished, which makes recruits anxious to conform.

Recruits' psychological resistance is depleted. The army applies stress continuously by depriving recruits of sleep and comfort, and 'beasting' them. (Beasting includes shouting insults into a recruit's face, giving orders intended to humiliate or exhaust a recruit, disrupting a recruit's personal affairs [e.g. emptying their wardrobe across a room], and varying degrees of physical force.)

Conformity is enforced through punishments. Recruits are punished collectively for an individual's shortcoming, who may then be punished again by peers.

2 The army uses operant conditioning techniques to mould individual civilians into soldiers who act with collective obedience. Wayne Sharrocks, who joined the British infantry at 17, explains:

'At the start of training, if they told you, for instance, "Take all your clothes off and run around the block naked..." you'd probably question it... but six months down the line for some reason you want to get into this thing so much... that you will just do whatever they say whenever they say it.'

3 Recruits learn to kill on demand. Their opponents in war are depersonalised as 'enemy targets', which will 'fall when hit'. If training is effective, then the soldier imagines his or her enemy without the humanity of a real person. Recruits in close-combat roles are taken a stage further. Their acute stress response (the fight-or-flight mechanism) is stimulated repeatedly to summon adrenalised aggression (animal aggression) as the primary means to overcome a situation of stress. Child recruits for infantry roles are made to conjure furious aggression and direct it lethally by driving a blade into an effigy of their enemy. A short film of British infantry recruits from age 17 is available online (240):

'I wanna see it in your eyes that you wanna kill these fuckers. Imagine these dummies are the fucking Taliban and they've just killed some of your mates. You wanna fuckin' kill them. Show me your war face! [recruits yell] You need some fucking more aggression, show me your war face. [louder] Show me your war face! [recruits roar] What do we wanna do to the enemy? [recruits yell as one – 'Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill!' – and charge at the dummies].'

‘The Committee is also concerned that ... early enlistment is allowed for 16- and 17-year-old children who wish to leave the country at the time when they would be required to undertake military service, and for “those who are obliged to request early enlistment because of their studies”.’

CRC Concluding Observations: Mexico 2011 (47)

Even when not overtly violent, the physical demands of military training can be harmful to young people who are still developing physically. Research on the UK armed forces has found that child recruits are more likely than adults to be discharged due to training injury, because their bones and musculature are not yet fully developed (63, 97, 98).

Death in training is also a risk. Between 2000 and 2016, 131 British armed forces personnel died during training or on exercise, equivalent to approximately one death in training every six weeks (99). A US study found that between 1989 and 1992, ‘at least 700’ armed forces personnel died while engaged in such training activities as swimming, parachuting, weapons training, and physical fitness exercises (100). In 2013 two British army recruits died from heatstroke during training marches; three American recruits died in the space of one week in 2016, apparently from heat-related problems during training exercises; and in 2017 an Austrian recruit died from heatstroke caused by training exercises (101,102,103). Although none of

these deceased were aged under 18, their deaths indicate some of the physical risks to children in military training, particularly where there has been no modification of training exercises to accommodate their physical immaturity.

Psychological Effects

Research into the mental effects of military employment has historically focused on veterans returning from deployment, but psychological stressors are present long before this, from the start of training. US research has found that between 2004 and 2009, the peak rate of attempted suicide during basic training was four times higher than the peak rate of attempted suicide during deployment to Iraq or Afghanistan (104). Indeed, some veterans state that their initial training was more traumatic than deployment and blame its psychological manipulation techniques – which are not ‘de-programmed’ when they are discharged – for difficulties adjusting to civilian life afterwards (63).

A measure of stress in adolescence is healthy, but a high-stress environment becomes

harmful (55). Relative to adults, adolescents are temperamentally more anxious, and more likely to experience depressed mood and emotional volatility (58,73). Crucially, they are also more reactive to stressors (58,73). That is, adolescents react to stressors with a greater anxiety and then remain anxious for longer (55,105). Accordingly, under stress they experience greater strain and are more likely than adults to be overwhelmed (58). Under stress, adolescents are also more likely than adults to develop anxiety-related mental health problems, such as depression (55,73,105). A high stress environment can even disrupt the development of the brain, which during adolescence is sensitive to repeated or prolonged stress. Under chronic stress, the brain’s transition to full maturation is compromised, particularly systems involved in the regulation of emotions (73,105). There is some evidence that this can lead to lasting problems with anxiety in adulthood (55,105).

‘The actual pace and pattern of physical, psychological and social development varies not just from one individual to another, but also across different socio-cultural settings. However, there is evidence that significant changes occur between the ages of 16 and 18 years...’

The recruitment of children by the UK armed forces: A critique from health professionals (59)

While adult recruits can also be affected by the same risks, the neuroscientific research indicates that the brain changes so rapidly in mid-adolescence that the reduction in vulnerability between the ages of 16 and 18 is typically critical. According to a report by public health experts on child enlistment in the UK:

‘The actual pace and pattern of physical, psychological and social development varies not just from one individual to another, but also across different socio-cultural settings. However, there is evidence that significant changes occur between the ages of 16 and 18 years, and that further change continues for several years beyond the age of 18 years in many individuals.’ (59)

It should also be noted that the youngest recruits tend to be concentrated in the riskiest army roles (particularly the infantry), for which training is particularly stressful and coercive. Whereas in civilian settings, the presence of family and established friends can mitigate the effects of stress, military rules prohibit or tightly restrict contact outside the base (63).

In addition to loading child recruits with toxic levels of stress, military training also influences attitudes and behaviours. Studies have shown that the impact on recruits is profound:

‘[Recruits] aversion to violence is reduced, such that acts normally considered wrong are now deemed legitimate for military purposes. They have been trained to react to adversity antagonistically with aggression. They have also been encouraged to valorise military culture as superior to the civilian life they left behind. They carry their soldier programming with them at work and at home, and it persists after they leave the army. Its marks are seen in, for example, elevated levels of anxiety, a greater likelihood of violent behaviour and, for many, debilitating feelings of shame once actions on the battlefield are evaluated humanely, in their wider moral complexity.’ (63)

In particular, training to kill chronically stimulates aggression, depersonalises opponents, and makes a virtue of violence as an effective conflict tactic. An analysis of the available British

and American research has found that enlisting in the army increases the propensity of personnel to behave violently at home and in the community (63).

In summary, although intense physical and psychological conditioning may be an essential part of armed forces’ training, its harmful impact on young people in mid-adolescence is clear. The objective and subjective evidence of psychological harm inherent in modern military training appears irreconcilable with the right of children to an environment conducive to their development, in which the risks of undue harm are minimised.

Evidently these training conditions affect thousands of young recruits who may never be exposed to armed conflict itself. Consequently, the prohibition on deployment of under-18s, whilst important, does nothing to protect child recruits from the permanent psychological harm that military training can cause.

Occasionally, military personnel responsible for training acknowledge the harm it can cause to the younger age group. A review of arrangements

for minors in the Australian armed forces recorded the view of some training staff that 'the requirements of some employment categories may be inappropriate for minors. The emotional, psychological or physical maturity required to undertake training, or in fact to perform in the field on completion of training, may simply be too much for someone under the age of 18 years' (77).

Other staff at the infantry training course shared this view, noting that 'apart from the very heavy physical requirements of the course, the psychological and emotional maturity required are unlikely to be found in a minor' (77).

Insubstantial Education

The CRC requires that education for children reflect 'the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples...' ³⁹ The Committee on the Rights of the Child is clear that the education environment also matters, stating that 'children should also learn about human rights by seeing human rights standards implemented in practice, whether at home, in school, or within the community. Human rights education should be a comprehensive, life-long process and start with the reflection of human rights values in the daily life and experiences of children. [...] A school which allows bullying or other violent and exclusionary practices to occur is not one which meets the requirements of article 29(1).' (12)

The promise of ongoing education and vocational training is a prominent message in recruitment literature provided to potential child recruits and their parents. It is common for states to

define military training centres as education institutions, and then use this in defence of enlisting children. For example, the British army training site for its youngest recruits, aged from 16, is titled the Army Foundation College.

In practice, military training centres do not operate to the standards expected of civilian education. Unlike civilian teachers, military instructors are not recruited on the strength of their experience of working with children and young people, nor does their basic training prepare them for it. They do not normally apply to be instructors, but are posted to a training centre by order of the chain of command. A non-commissioned officer at Deepcut barracks in the UK stated in a television interview that many of the instructors at the site 'were actually put there because nobody else wanted them. It sort of had a bit of a reputation of being a dumping ground to get rid of unwanted NCOs [non-commissioned officers]' (106).⁴⁰ Similarly, the Australian Commonwealth Ombudsman has noted that postings in a training role are generally unpopular due to the long hours involved, intense course content, public scrutiny, lack of status and boredom. (77)

Where child recruits are offered formal education as part of their training, it is rudimentary, determined by the needs of the military institution, and has limited transferrable value to recruits after they leave the armed forces and re-join the jobs market (140). Child recruits are afforded little time for such education during their intensive military training.

These arrangements stand in contrast to the requirements for education set out by the CRC. In

its General Comment on the aims of education, the Committee on the Rights of the Child stated:

'Education must also be aimed at ensuring that essential life skills are learnt by every child... Basic skills include not only literacy and numeracy but also life skills such as the ability to make well-balanced decisions; to resolve conflicts in a non-violent manner; and to develop a healthy lifestyle, good social relationships and responsibility, critical thinking, creative talents, and other abilities... [It must] reflect an appropriate balance between promoting the physical, mental, spiritual and emotional aspects of education, the intellectual, social and practical dimensions, and the childhood and lifelong aspects... [It should be] designed and provided in such a way that it promotes and reinforces the range of specific ethical values enshrined in the Convention, including education for peace.' (12)

39. CRC art 29.

40. Between 1995 - 2002 four young recruits, including three teenagers, died from gunshot wounds at Deepcut army barracks. The deaths were recorded as suicide but the original investigations were criticised as deeply flawed and two new inquests were ordered in 2014 and 2016. Bullying, harassment and sexual assault were alleged to be commonplace at the site.



A US Marine Corps drill instructor screams at a Marine recruit during a boot camp assault course, © US Marines Photo / Alamy

THE MILITARY ENVIRONMENT

Risk of Abuse

Once enlisted, children are treated as adults and lose many of the protections that are normally due them by right. For example, many practices which are routine in the armed forces would be unlawful and/or criminal in civilian life if applied to the care of children. The legal exemptions which permit armed forces to circumvent these safeguards exist solely for the convenience of the institutions concerned. They do not support the best interests of the child.

In many countries, legislation requires adults working closely

with children to be vetted (including criminal record checks) to ensure they are suitable for the role. However, in some countries (such as the UK) although the law defines a 'child' as anyone under the age of 18, the legislation on criminal vetting does not apply to children who are in employment. Consequently, there is no legal requirement for armed forces personnel to be criminally vetted for their suitability to work with children, despite the fact adult personnel live and work alongside child recruits in a degree of proximity rarely encountered outside the

family in civilian life, and which substantially increases the risk of abuse. Australian Defence Force instructions acknowledge that armed forces accommodation puts minors at 'risk of exposure to alcohol, drugs, unacceptable behaviour and/or inappropriate relationships' but does not require them to be housed separately from adults (242).

Counterintuitively, child recruits' vulnerability to abuse may be higher in countries where they are recruited in relatively small numbers. Where a few children are mixed with a large number of adults their particular needs can

‘Adolescence is a life stage characterized by growing opportunities, capacities, aspirations, energy and creativity, but also significant vulnerability.’

CRC General Comment 20 on the implementation of the rights of the child during adolescence, 2016. (13)

be overlooked and safeguarding arrangements may be weaker. This applies in particular to girls, who are invariably a small minority among recruits and especially vulnerable to abuse.

Many aspects of the military environment increase the risk of abuse, including the rank hierarchy, a hyper-masculine culture, high stress, physical demands, isolation from family, powerful group loyalty dynamics, and the subjugation of the self required by initial military training (63). Researchers in Canada have highlighted ‘the deep-seated hierarchical nature of military cultures, and the degree to which emphasis on the values of obedience, conformity and respect for superiors can lead to abuses of power, [and] the susceptibility of junior members to negative social influence’ (243).

These factors affect all recruits, but children are more vulnerable because, in an environment which regards civilian social norms as inferior, children may lack sufficient life experience to recognise unreasonable behaviour or to respond appropriately (63). This is exacerbated by the fact that, as seen above, military training

makes use of coercive methods in degrees which would not be tolerated in a civilian workplace or educational setting, making it difficult for recruits — and their superiors — to recognise when ‘robust’ training is abusive. Ill-treatment also thrives when recruits are deterred from complaining by a fear of retribution or being branded ‘weak’ in an environment where perceived weakness is stigmatised.

Accounts of physical and psychological bullying and ill-treatment in the military are common internationally. For example, in 2017, following the death of an Austrian conscript in training, the German language edition of *Vice* published numerous testimonies from conscripts, exposing a culture of institutional abuse (93):

‘I still have nightmares of my time with the Bundesheer [army]. I wake up screaming every time. It has cost me several relationships. ... At night, I was beaten up by groups downstairs. Two instructors came to me regularly and told me how they would celebrate my expected suicide, urinate on my grave and make jokes with the survivors.’

‘In forums to this day, names are still spreading, which instil fear and horror. A lieutenant, who has since passed away, left recruits under the ice-cold showers for hours. I have experienced many things myself. The fact that the Bundesheer is not beautiful, of course, is clear to everyone, but the first weeks are hell on earth. Fear and panic rule, spread by the instructors. At the time, I thought this must be how people in the internment camps in the 1930s and 40s felt. The Bundesheer has three advantages despite all this: one learns to drink and how to sell and buy drugs under constant observation. And if I feel bad today — because of work or a relationship — then I think of that bad time and I feel better immediately.’

‘I lived in constant fear for the four weeks of basic training. Fear of what shit would come next.’

Sexual Violence, Assault and Harassment

The military institution remains pervasively masculinised, despite the minority presence of women and girls. British, American and Australian army doctrine encourages personnel to cultivate

‘States parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse.’

Article 19 Convention on the Rights of the Child

the traditionally masculine attributes of a ‘warrior spirit’ or ‘warrior ethos’ as the making of an effective soldier, irrespective of their gender (107, 108, 109). Several studies have found that a soldier’s competence is routinely equated with masculine potency and a willingness to dominate adversaries using violence, whereas incompetence is associated with impotence and femininity (110, 111, 66). In 2017, a female British officer advised women considering an army career to be mindful of the dominance of men and their expectations:

‘You are going into a male dominated environment. You should all be aspiring to meet the male standard. If you want to be respected by the males you are going to be working alongside, this is what you need to do.’ (112)

One consequence of a masculinised military culture is the frequent denigration of women by their male co-workers. One of many published examples is that recorded by British researchers in 2006: a group of men grabbed a female officer while on exercise and ‘ducked her head in a bucket of water and each time she came up for breath

she had to repeat “I am useless and I am a female”.’ (113)

Confirming anecdote (114), research in the UK and US has found that the sexual harassment of women by men is substantially more common in the armed forces than in civilian life (115, 116). British research has found that the youngest female recruits are the group most at risk of sexual harassment and violence, exceeding the civilian rate by a large margin (113). The research also finds that the early exposure of boys to a heavily masculinised culture leads to an increased risk of violent behaviour, particularly against women (117, 118, 119, 120, 121, 122).

An investigation into sexual assault and harassment in the Canadian armed forces also noted the elevated vulnerability of younger recruits:

‘With respect to the prevalence of sexual harassment and sexual assault, age, linked with a lack of maturity, appears to be a prominent factor, given that young persons are “still exploring their sexuality” and feel “invulnerable”. Further, the unique circumstances of training, operational deployment, and career courses, may

create particular conditions of vulnerability.’ (243)

Similarly, in 2016 the head of the British army acknowledged its ‘overly sexualised’ culture (123). In France, in response to an official report into sexual harassment in the armed forces in 2014, the controller-general of the armed forces observed that ‘the great majority of cases involve relatively young recruits – both male and female – from relatively poor and uneducated backgrounds’ (124).

Despite widespread recognition of the elevated risk of sexual violence in the armed forces, particularly against younger personnel, child recruits can lack confidence to report it, for fear that they will not be listened to or that their career will suffer as a result (77, 115). Their fears are reasonable when sexual violence and harassment are so routine that they have become normalised in military culture.

‘THE TRUTH IS THAT THE SCOURGE OF SEXUAL ASSAULT IN THE MILITARY REMAINS STATUS QUO’

Recent years have seen numerous investigations into serious and widespread sexual harassment and bullying in the armed forces in Australia, Canada, Germany, Israel, UK and the US. Many of the victims were child recruits.

In Australia, a royal commission has investigated the physical and sexual abuse of teenage recruits in the armed forces since the 1960s (216). Recruits from the age of 15 were subjected to regular, repeated violent sexual assault, including anal and oral gang rape; some child recruits were forced to rape each other. Victims who reported the abuse were not believed by staff, dishonourably discharged, or told it was a ‘rite of passage’. The Commission found ‘widespread physical and sexual abuse of child recruits’, which was ‘tolerated’ by senior staff (217). The Commission’s report found that the ‘institutional environment was such that abuse was allowed to occur.’ (217)

In 2016, an anonymous survey of women in the Israel Defense Forces found that one in six reported experiences of sexual harassment, with most reporting multiple incidents (213). A survey of 43,000 Canadian armed forces personnel also published in 2016 found that 27 per cent of female military personnel reported having been sexually assaulted at least once during their military career (defined as ‘sexual attacks, unwanted sexual touching, or sexual activity to which the victim is unable to consent’). Of female recruits aged 24 or younger, 54 per cent had been assaulted in the past year (218).

In Germany, an investigation began in 2016 into the sexual abuse of army recruits, including children, at Pfullendorf barracks. ‘Sadistic sexual practices’, which were filmed, were alleged to be widespread (230). Criminal charges were subsequently filed against seven soldiers for grievous bodily harm, sexual assault and false imprisonment. At least four soldiers were dismissed as a result of the incidents but the criminal case was eventually dropped as the court was unable to establish definitively who was responsible for the abuse (244). In a separate case in 2017, 14 military personnel were under investigation in relation to the sexual harassment of

a soldier (age unspecified) (229). In November 2017 two female recruits (aged 18 and 22) were allegedly raped at the Toderdorf barracks in north Germany (245). In total at least 187 allegations of sexual assault were recorded by the German armed forces in 2017, and 11 allegations of rape (245).

In the UK, a second inquest was held in 2016 for Cheryl James, one of four young recruits who died in suspicious circumstances at Deepcut Barracks between 1995 and 2002. The inquest revealed evidence of widespread abuse, bullying, physical assault and sexual harassment at the base, where many adolescent recruits were trained. Recruits were afraid to complain because the instructors in charge of their welfare were often also responsible for the abuse (106). One recruit who trained with Cheryl James told the inquest, ‘We would tend to ourselves, there was no accountability... [staff] had a power trip and they got a buzz off it. They were corporals or sergeants and we were recruits and they thought they could take advantage.’ (210) The head of army personnel conceded at the inquest that the barracks had been ‘highly sexualised’ and ‘morally chaotic’, where the pressure on young recruits could be ‘intolerable.’ (210) In 2015, an official, anonymous survey of UK armed forces personnel found that 13 per cent of women had had a ‘particularly upsetting’ experience of sexualised behaviour directed at them in the previous 12 months, equivalent to approximately 1,000 women affected each year (115).

A major study in 2014 estimated that 26 per cent of female armed forces personnel in the US military experienced sexual harassment in the previous year, and 5 per cent had suffered one or more sexual assaults. It further found that a higher proportion of the youngest female recruits – 7 per cent – had been sexually assaulted (219). In 2016, the US military received 6,172 complaints of sexual assaults, ranging from groping to rape; 58 per cent of victims said they had ‘experienced reprisals or retaliation’ for reporting (211). Senator Kirsten Gillibrand commented that ‘the scourge of sexual assault in the military remains status quo.’ (211)



A British soldier patrols a street in Iraq, © Shawn Baldwin/EPA

PARTICIPATION IN HOSTILITIES

Until the adoption of OPAC, no international law prevented states from sending children to war. British personnel under the age of 18 fought and died in the Korean War of 1950-1953 and the Falklands War of 1982, and participated in peacekeeping operations in the Balkans. In the 1990s, the US deployed 17-year-old children to the Persian Gulf War, Bosnia and Somalia (246).

By ratifying OPAC, more than two-thirds of states worldwide have committed in principle 'to take all feasible measures to ensure that members of their armed forces who have not attained the age of 18 years do not take a direct part in hostilities'.⁴¹ The change has helped to protect many thousands of children from the consequences of participating in war, but this protection remains incomplete.⁴²

While some states which still recruit children, such as India, have committed not to deploy them to any 'operational area' (126), others interpret OPAC narrowly. Cyprus, for example, reserves the right to deploy

armed forces personnel, regardless of age, where there is a 'genuine military need'.⁴³ Similarly, Australian Defence Instructions oblige the armed forces to 'take all feasible measures to ensure that Defence members under 18 do not participate in hostilities' but only 'where it will not adversely impact on the conduct of operations' (242).

The UK does not routinely deploy children, but reserves the right to use them in hostilities if 'operational effectiveness' depends on it. The US believes the treaty allows it to deploy underage personnel to any 'forward' (i.e. frontline) area where a firefight is not currently ongoing; if one breaks out, child recruits may remain if 'military considerations' make it impractical to remove them (247). Such reservations subordinate the best interests of the child to military expedience.

Between 2003 and 2004, the US deployed nearly 60 17-year-olds to Iraq and Afghanistan (128); between 2003 and 2010 the UK deployed at least 22 children

to the same conflicts, although the Ministry of Defence has committed to prevent this in the future (129, 130). The Committee on the Rights of the Child has judged that both states' positions do not meet the requirements of the treaty (125, 131).

France, another major military power, does not allow recruits under 18 to participate in military operations overseas, but has not expressly ruled out deployment within France, for example in relation to counter-terrorism (132). Similarly, the Committee on the Rights of the Child has expressed concern that New Zealand Defence Force orders only prohibit 'active service outside New Zealand and therefore implicitly allow active service inside New Zealand by soldiers below the age of 18' (133).

There is also wide discrepancy between states in relation to children performing armed guard duties. This matters because the effectiveness of an armed guard as a deterrent depends completely on his or her readiness to open fire in the event that a military site is

‘The Committee remains seriously concerned that the current policies and regulations, despite certain safeguards, do allow for the deployment of 17-year-old service members to such areas where they can be requested to perform inherently dangerous duties and may be at risk of direct participation in hostilities.’

CRC Concluding Observations: USA 2017 (125)

attacked by a hostile force. As such, armed guard duty can become active participation in hostilities at a moment’s notice.

In view of these risks, some states prohibit the use of child recruits as armed guards (e.g. Germany) whereas in others it is routine (e.g. UK). Israel Defense Forces (IDF) training requires recruits, including those under 18, to patrol and guard military bases, some of which are in the West Bank (29). Children from age 15 also participate in the Israeli Police Force ‘Civil Guard’, whose activities include acting as border guards, searching for explosives, operating checkpoints, and preventing acts of terrorism. Child volunteers in the ‘emergency squad’ section of the Civil Guard keep firearms in their home and are on standby for immediate deployment in event of emergency, such as an attack on a settlement, and work in collaboration with the IDF (29).

Even where states do not use their child recruits to participate in hostilities, protection from the effects of armed conflict remains incomplete. As members of a

state’s armed forces they ‘remain lawful targets for enemy forces who, in many cases, may be unable to distinguish them from their older comrades’ (134).

Outside of situations of armed conflict, military sites, such as barracks, are particular targets for some armed groups, putting child recruits at risk. In 2010, for example, three men were convicted of plotting an attack on an army base in Sydney, intending to cause as many casualties as possible (135). In 2012, rocket propelled grenades were fired at the Pakistan Military Academy in Abbottabad, causing damage to the building but no casualties (136). In 2013, a soldier was killed outside his barracks in London by two men targeting soldiers in retaliation for British military action in Afghanistan and Iraq (137). Recent years have seen multiple attacks on Indian army bases and troop convoys in Kashmir, killing at least 46 soldiers (138). All four of these state armed forces recruit below the age of 18, such that child recruits remain at risk from attacks of this kind.

Notwithstanding the fact child recruits are not deployed until they have reached the age of 18, the common practice of assigning them roles that are most exposed in war subjects them to disproportionate risks across the course of their armed forces career. In the UK, for example, it is a matter of policy to enlist 16- and 17-year-olds ‘particularly for the infantry’ (139), which suffers the army’s highest fatality rate and in which child recruits are over-represented (140). Thus, even though children enlisted by the UK are not normally sent to war until they turn 18, they face higher war risks than adult recruits across their military career as a whole. A study by ForcesWatch and Child Soldiers International in 2013 found that soldiers who had joined the British army at 16 and completed their training were approximately twice as likely to die or be injured in Afghanistan as those who enlisted aged 18 or above (141).⁴⁴ Although the effect of this elevated risk is not experienced by soldiers until they reach adulthood, the risk itself was assumed when the recruits were still minors.

41. OPAC art 1.

42. At the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, states were encouraged to ‘enact and implement national legislation *prohibiting* members of their armed forces who have not attained the age of 18 years from taking a direct part in hostilities’ (emphasis added), which would be a stronger safeguard than the requirement of OPAC to ‘take all feasible measures’ to prevent participation in hostilities (209).

43. Cyprus, OPAC Declaration.

44. A probable factor is the over-representation of minors in the infantry. The study found no statistical difference in the risk of fatality among those who joined at age 17.



British soldiers at Fort George, Ardersier in Scotland
© David Lichtneker / Alamy

LEAVING THE ARMED FORCES

Early Attrition

As reported in France, Germany, the UK and the US (142), the youngest military trainees are more likely to leave the armed forces during training or shortly afterwards. A third of British army trainees aged under 18 drop out during training, for example; similarly high attrition rates for minors are found in Germany and the Netherlands (22, 143).

Notably, research in the UK and US shows clearly that younger enlistees from poorer backgrounds face the highest risk of early attrition (81, 144, 145, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150, 151). In general, they are less tolerant of frustration, more rebellious, more anxious, and more vulnerable to stress, all of which combine to increase the risk of attrition (150, 152, 153). Research in the US found that they are more likely

than other recruits to struggle during training, resist military authority, and have debilitating mental health problems that prevent them from continuing. Minors are also significantly more likely than adults to be discharged due to training injury, according to British research (63, 97).

Rapid disillusionment with military life is undoubtedly an important factor in attrition amongst child recruits, resulting in part from unrealistic expectations encouraged by recruitment marketing. The adverts' promises of self-development, fulfilment, excitement and camaraderie prove false for many young recruits.

The Right to Leave

As explored in detail above, recruiting children for military purposes is unlawful under

OPAC unless it is, among other conditions, 'genuinely voluntary'.⁴⁵ On the principle that, insofar as consent is freely given it may be freely withdrawn, the requirement for recruitment to be voluntary prevents military authorities from retaining a child recruit against his or her will. Otherwise, one of the main purposes of OPAC – to prevent the forced recruitment of children – would mean little. Consequently, it is logical to interpret the requirement for recruitment to be 'genuinely voluntary' to mean that their military employment is not lawful unless their consent to it is ongoing. In practice, this means that child recruits must retain the right to leave the armed forces at any time of their choosing, without penalty, as long as they remain children in law.

45. OPAC art 3.

Statutory human rights bodies have supported this conclusion. The UK Parliament Joint Committee on Human Rights, in reviewing the provisions for child recruits to leave the armed forces on request, stated that 'without special provision for discharge (other than at the discretion of the commanding officer), there is a risk that continued service may not be considered voluntary in the sense required by the Optional Protocol', and recommended the introduction of a legal right of discharge for minors (154). A German parliamentary committee report similarly referred to expert evidence that 'the obligation for recruitment to be voluntary for minor recruits, enshrined in the Optional Protocol, is circumvented... when individuals who have enlisted at the age of 17 and whose six-month probationary period ends before their 18th birthday are no longer able to leave the Bundeswehr voluntarily and without facing sanctions' (155).

Similarly, in relation to eliminating forced labour, the ILO Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations has 'requested that minors engaged in a military career be able themselves to terminate their engagement' (156).

In practice, the right of enlistees to withdraw consent to enlistment afterwards is normally denied or severely restricted. After an initial

period, usually a few months, a child recruit may have no right to leave the armed forces for several years. In Australia, for example, recruits are bound for at least two to four years; in the UK, army recruits are bound for four years from the day of their 18th birthday (157, 158, 159). Harsh penalties are applied for attempting to leave the military without authorisation (i.e. going Absent Without Leave, which is a serious military offence).

In Germany, military legislation allows recruits of any age to request discharge within the first six months of training, but child recruits have no ongoing right to leave after this point even if they are still below the age of 18 (21). Children who attempt to leave without authorisation can be prosecuted under military law.

In Canada, child recruits who enlist in the Regular Officer Training Plan or Reserve Entry Training Plan must pay a financial penalty if they seek a discharge after the start of their second year of training. Those who remain in the programmes are obliged to provide a minimum of two months service in the armed forces for every one month of subsidised education they received under the training programme (160).

Since 2011, all child recruits in the British armed forces have had a legal right of discharge until the age of 18, but the process is still subject to a three-month 'cooling off' period and at least two children were prosecuted at court

martial for going absent without leave after the right of discharge had been introduced (161).

In the US, 17-year-olds can sign up for the Delayed Entry Program ('DEP') which allows them to defer reporting for duty for up to a year, while undertaking pre-military preparation. Although children who have enlisted under the DEP are allowed by law to withdraw, many child recruits have reported being harassed, verbally abused and threatened with fines or imprisonment for seeking to do so (248). Recruiters are prohibited from making such threats, but also instructed 'to make every effort to resell [service in the armed forces to] those individuals who request separation [release from enlistment contract]' (162). Applying this type of pressure to children, or 18-year-olds who enlisted as children, is incompatible with the concept of a voluntary choice made freely without coercion or duress.

Whilst formal administrative procedures may be required to implement a discharge request, these should be processed as a matter of right and with minimal delay. Allowing a child's discharge only at their commanding officer's discretion, or complicating release with undue administrative hurdles, delays, or penalties, restricts the child's ability to leave the armed forces at will and undermines the principle of consent. ■



Quantifying the Impact

‘States parties shall protect the child against all other forms of exploitation prejudicial to any aspects of the child’s welfare’

Article 36, Convention on the Rights of the Child

MENTAL HEALTH AND ALCOHOL MISUSE

Research has shown that military employment increases several risks to health and wellbeing, with the youngest recruits most affected. Data fully disaggregated by age, with minors as a distinct category, is rarely available but the studies examined for this report show, in general, a clear linear trend correlating decreasing age with increasing risk. The American Public Health Association has found that ‘military service is associated with disproportionately poor health for those in late adolescence.’ (17) Similar findings have been made elsewhere (63, 163).

UK and US research over the last decade has found that, compared with civilians, military personnel and veterans are more likely to have anxiety-related mental

health problems, drink heavily, behave violently in everyday life, and experience poorer long-term health (163, 164, 165, 166, 167, 168, 169, 170, 171, 172.).

Relative to UK civilian rates, for example, anxiety/depression⁴⁶ and harmful drinking are at least twice as common in the armed forces (63, 164, 165). Studies have found that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is only slightly more common in the armed forces than in the general population, but twice as common among infantry personnel, which is the major role group for the youngest recruits aged 16-17 (140, 173, 174). (British PTSD studies of military groups are not usually carried out in anonymous conditions, which is likely to lead to under-reporting (163).)

These problems in military populations are partly due to traumatic war experiences, which are a major factor, but

not the only one. Pre-existing vulnerabilities associated with a troubled childhood – more common among those who enlist youngest – contribute strongly to later problems associated with military employment. These factors combine hazardously with the stress and indoctrination of initial training (63, 104, 163, 175, 176, 177). Even before they are sent to war, military personnel in the UK and US are more likely than civilians to drink at harmful levels, smoke, commit drug-related offences, and suffer from stress-related mental health problems (91, 104, 164, 165, 167, 177, 178, 179, 180, 181).

The prevalence of these problems increases after veterans leave the forces. Those who were

46. In the studies, anxiety and depression are grouped as ‘common mental disorders’ (CMDs), which include a range of anxiety disorders experienced as mild or severe.



+45%

Increased suicide rate among UK army's youngest recruits compared to their civilian peers

in the British armed forces in 2003 but had left by 2013 have been between two and three times as likely as the general population to have problems with anxiety/depression, harmful drinking, and PTSD. Over the same period, even ex-forces personnel who were not sent to Iraq or Afghanistan have been 2.5 times as likely as civilians to screen positive for PTSD (163).

Research in the US has also found that military employment has an adverse mental health impact before recruits are sent to war. The prevalence of both depression and attempted suicide increase during basic training (104).

There appears to be no evidence to suggest that enlistment improves the mental health of the youngest recruits, but there is much to show the opposite. In the UK, the youngest personnel

and veterans are more likely than both older recruits and the same-age general population to experience PTSD, to drink heavily, and to commit suicide, (182, 183, 184, 185). Compared with civilians aged 16-24, British personnel aged 18-24 are three times as likely to drink at harmful levels (164, 184).⁴⁷

Although suicide is generally less common in the military than in the general population, this is often not the case for the youngest recruits. In the UK, the rate of suicides among the youngest army recruits over the last two decades has exceeded that of same-age civilians by 45 per cent (185).⁴⁸ Over a similar period, the suicide rate among male ex-forces personnel aged 16-19 was three times that for the same age group in the general population (186).⁴⁹ Similarly, the Australian National Mental Health Commission

has found that whilst serving armed forces personnel have a lower suicide rate than civilians, the rate among male veterans aged 18-24 is approximately double that of civilians with the same demographic profile (187). Canadian research also found an elevated suicide rate among army personnel (all ages), compared to the general population, particularly those with lower levels of education, and those assigned to combat roles, as is typical among the youngest recruits (188).

47. The figures for the military group are extrapolated from Table 1 in Head, et al., 2016 (164).

48. For details refer to Table 3 in source cited.

49. For details refer to Table 1 in source cited.

‘Child soldiers may find it difficult to disengage from the idea that violence is a legitimate means of achieving one’s aims. Even where the experience of participating in ‘the cause’ has been positive ...the transition to a non-violent lifestyle will be difficult.’

Graça Machel, Impact of armed conflict on children (2)

AGGRESSION AND VIOLENCE

Contrary to the common assumption that joining the army reduces delinquent violent behaviour in young people, research in Canada, Germany, the UK, and the US has shown that military training and culture reinforce several known risk factors for violent behaviour.⁵⁰ Research in the UK and US in the last decade has found that violent offending became more prevalent after enlistment, even before personnel were sent to war in Iraq or Afghanistan (167, 189); and that violent offending was substantially more common among military personnel than among civilians (167, 168, 171, 177). The British research further discovered that the rate of violent offending increased again after personnel were sent to war, reaching double the pre-enlistment rate (167).

It is not known why enlistment is accompanied by an increase in violent behaviour before personnel are deployed, but it is likely that initial training plays a role. The training process stimulates aggression and rewards dominance behaviours,

and studies based in Canada, Germany, and the US have found that antagonistic attitudes increase during army training and persist afterwards (190, 191, 192). Military culture, by valorising the ‘warrior hero’ ideal, is also likely to contribute, since research into the influence of dominant, traditionally masculine norms has found repeatedly that they contribute to an increased risk of violence (117, 118, 119, 120, 121, 122).

The studies show that younger recruits and those from poorer backgrounds are more likely than others to behave violently (166, 167, 168, 177). American and British studies have found that pre-existing problems, such as a history of anti-social behaviour, combine with military factors, such as being trained for a combat role, to drive up the prevalence of violent behaviour among personnel (168, 177, 193, 194)⁵¹. Since child enlistees are less mature than their older counterparts, typically come from poorer backgrounds, and are over-represented in infantry jobs, they carry more of the major risk factors for violent behaviour (63).

Psychological development in adolescence may also be a factor

in increased violence among young recruits. The same brain development processes which incline adolescents towards risk-taking (see ‘Capacity for Complex Decision Making in Mid-Adolescence’ p. 25) also influence how violence is perceived. Studies have shown that young age is a risk factor for developing a fascination with violence, and also that fantasy portrayals of violence in popular culture can inspire young people to sign up (16, 22). According to evidence given to a German parliamentary committee:

‘[C]ompared with adult recruits, recruits who are minors report more of this fascination with violence. This develops fundamentally into a vicious circle of violence, that is to say, the experiencing of violence is always also associated with the perpetration of violence and this can manifest itself in the form of domestic violence.

50. For details and sources, refer to *The First Ambush*, Tables 2 and 3, pp. 41-42 (63).

51. For a discussion of the association between violent behaviour, pre-enlistment history, military role assignment, and deployment, refer to *The First Ambush*, section 8 (63).

‘Viable alternatives to joining armed forces or armed groups should be available for children, including adolescents. This will include educational and vocational programmes, income generating activities, and access to livelihood opportunities.’

The Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups, Principle 6.3

This association is explained by the symptoms of post-traumatic illness in which a higher degree of alertness can also lead to more aggressive behaviour and at the same time a fascination with violence leads to more violence being perpetrated. To sum up, in principle brain development in adolescence means that young people make more risky decisions and these risky decisions help to explain the risk factors in adolescence frequently described in research for both post-traumatic illnesses and aggressive behaviour, as well as for the fascination with violence which young people describe.’ (22)

GENERAL HEALTH

Although new recruits begin their military careers healthier than their civilian counterparts, in later life veterans are more likely to have poorer general health and die prematurely (169, 170, 195, 196). One wide-ranging review of the US research since the Second World War concluded that:

‘...we find very little evidence to support the notion that there are any benefits that accrue to men

and materialise in their lives as a lower likelihood of dying as a consequence of military service overall or at any particular age at [the point of] enlistment.’ (195)

In the UK, government statistics show that 74 per cent of veterans reported being in good or very good health in 2015, vs. 78 per cent of non-veterans; and 40 per cent reported at least one long-term health condition, vs. 35 per cent of non-veterans (169).

One reason for this is that, even before recruits are sent to war, they run a substantial risk of incurring a career-ending musculoskeletal injury during initial training, and again during pre-deployment training (97, 197). Veterans’ higher rates of mental health problems, heavy drinking and smoking, combined with their relatively poor socioeconomic outcomes, are also likely to contribute to poorer general health in later life.

Research has shown that camaraderie and the intense physical exercise during initial training could buffer the health impacts of military employment, but there is no systematic evidence of a health advantage over civilian alternatives (63).

Although there appear to have been no studies exploring the long-term health outcomes of child recruits in affluent countries, they are more likely than adult recruits to carry the major risk factors. For example, British research shows that the youngest recruits are more likely than the older: to sustain a training injury (because their bones are underdeveloped) (97, 98); to drink at harmful levels (163, 183, 184); and to be discharged within a few months or years, struggling to find a new job afterwards (140, 81).

SOCIOECONOMIC OUTCOMES

The Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups state that:

‘Viable alternatives to joining armed forces or armed groups should be available for children, including adolescents. This will include educational and vocational programmes, income generating activities, and access to livelihood opportunities.’⁵²

Yet in contrast to this principle, states which actively recruit

children routinely present enlistment as an opportunity to gain education, training, and a salary. These are significant incentives for young people and their parents, particularly those living in economically deprived areas, as is typical of child recruits in many countries. However, contrary to the popular image of the military as a route out of poverty for disadvantaged young men, the long term socioeconomic prospects of enlisted personnel are relatively poor. Research in the US has found that, since the end of the Second World War, veterans have been worse off than non-veterans, including those from economically deprived backgrounds (196, 198, 199).

In this context, it is important to recognise that many children who join the armed forces leave school to do so; they do not, as is popularly assumed, enlist having dropped out of education. Recruitment campaigns which present military employment as a glamorous alternative to school risk enticing children to leave full-time education before they have gained essential qualifications to enhance their job prospects throughout their working life.

Indeed, British research has found that veterans are substantially more likely than non-veterans to be unemployed, particularly infantry veterans. In financial year 2015/16, for example, 16 per cent of veterans from across the armed forces who had left before completing four years' service were unemployed six months afterwards, which was three times the national unemployment rate and greater also than the 13 per cent unemployment rate for civilians aged 16-24 (200). A study in 2013 found that 30 per cent of infantry veterans who had left the army within four years of enlisting – a disproportionate number of whom enlisted as minors – were not in work, education or training 18 months afterwards (201). The national unemployment rate that year was 8 per cent (21 per cent for 16-24-year-olds) (200).⁵³

British research indicates that recruits who stay in the armed forces for a full career can outstrip the earning power of their civilian counterparts, but these are the minority; most recruits leave the armed forces within a few years (with a large minority leaving after just a few

months) (63).⁵⁴ The average career length of a British infantry recruit who enlists below 18, completes training, and does not drop out of service early is 10 years (202). Although by current standards this is a long period for most young people in their first job, the average trained infantryman re-joins the jobs market in their mid-20s, trained for a highly specialised profession which has little transferability to civilian life. One young British veteran described life in the armed forces as 'a pause on normal life', and that on leaving 'you're just back at where you was to begin with', as an adolescent before enlistment (203).

52. Principle 6.3.

53. As of 2017, Australian armed forces veterans also have an elevated unemployment rate: 30 per cent, compared to a national rate of 6 per cent (232). For further analysis of the effect of early enlistment on young people's long term socioeconomic status, see *The First Ambush*, section 10.1 (63).

54. For details and discussion, refer to *The First Ambush*, sections 10.3 and 10.4 (63).

Veterans' relatively poor socioeconomic outcomes are partly explained by some of the reasons for their relatively poor health in later life: a higher probability of living with physical injury, mental health problems, and/or alcohol misuse. Another factor is the high rate of turnover in the armed forces, particularly during initial training.

British research indicates that early enlistment puts child recruits at a clear disadvantage relative both to their civilian peers and to older recruits. This is because enlisting adolescents from age 16 takes young people out of full-time education while subjecting them to a high risk of attrition from their military training. Specifically, while 83 per cent of young people from economically deprived backgrounds in the UK now continue in full-time education after they turn 16, those who enlist in the armed forces do not (204).⁵⁵ By the time the army's initial training course comes to an end, a third of recruits aged under 18 have left (either by choice or because the army has dismissed them); their attrition rate is 50 per cent higher than that for adult recruits.⁵⁶

This leaves many former child recruits struggling to re-join full-time education or looking for another job on the strength of qualifications they gained up to age 16.

Recruits who enlist at a young age will not experience adulthood as civilians until they leave the forces, typically in their mid-20s. Veterans often report that re-adjusting to civilian norms is very challenging after their military training enculturated them to denigrate civilians, take orders uncritically, and value traditionally masculine attitudes of dominance, for example (63). British research shows that exit from the military community is marked by a loss of social support networks and fewer social activities, which are important buffers for stress (205). For these and other reasons, the prevalence of stress-related mental health problems increases markedly once veterans leave the forces,⁵⁷ especially those who leave within the first few months or years (206).

Many veterans overcome these challenges to manage the transition to civilian life successfully. However, according

to research focused on the UK, the group most likely to struggle are ex-soldiers who enlisted at a young age (163). Multiple factors increase this group's vulnerability to post-discharge socio economic problems. As noted above, younger recruits are more likely to be prematurely discharged from service (including during initial training) which, in itself, is a risk factor for increased stress-related mental health problems. Similarly, having joined young and with few qualifications, the youngest recruits are more likely to enlist for army roles that offer the least continuing education and training and carry the highest risks of physical

55. Here, 'disadvantaged' is defined by eligibility for free meals at school, which applies to around 15 per cent of children (204).

56. British army intake of minors, 2008-09 to 2012-13 inclusive: 15,395; of whom dropped out during training: 5,310 (34.5%). Adult intake, same period: 41,480; of whom dropped out during training: 9,700 (23.4%). (212, 221).

57. For a referenced list of stress-related mental health problems which gain in prevalence after discharge, see *The Last Ambush*, p. 25 (163).

‘...in principle brain development in adolescence means that young people make more risky decisions and these risky decisions help to explain the risk factors in adolescence frequently described in research for both post-traumatic illnesses and aggressive behaviour, as well as for the fascination with violence which young people describe.’

Evidence given to a Germany parliamentary committee (22)

and psychiatric trauma in war, particularly the infantry (140). This in turn increases the risk of ongoing mental health problems. An early entry into the military environment reduces children’s opportunities to build mature, supportive social networks in civilian life, meaning younger recruits have more limited support structures to return to when they leave the forces. These recruits do not ‘resettle’ in civilian life in the same manner adult recruits do – rather, they are building an independent adult identity and social structure from scratch.

Recruitment advertising targeted at adolescents typically emphasises opportunities for self-development, training and career progression. Experts have criticised these claims as not only inflated but fundamentally unfulfillable (22). Commenting on the German army’s claim, ‘We will make you fit for your future in society’ a psychologist argued this cannot be the case as ‘the military functions in a fundamentally different way from civil society’ (22). Military life is founded on absolute hierarchy, control, and unquestioning obedience which is atypical of,

and undesirable in, civilian life. Most soldiers struggle with the effects of institutionalisation when they are discharged but the impact is much more profound among recruits who entered training during adolescence when personality and identity are at key stages of development. It is sometimes suggested that an adverse childhood background – and not military employment – accounts for the psychological, social and economic problems found among young recruits and veterans. Yet the evidence points clearly in the other direction.⁵⁸ Research in the UK and US confirms that an adverse background is both common in children targeted for recruitment and an important independent contributor to their relatively poor mental health as military personnel (176, 177). However, it also shows that military culture, especially the intensity of basic training, tends to exacerbate prior mental ill-health and behaviour problems, and undermine the socioeconomic prospects of disadvantaged young people in the long-term (63). ■

58. The First Ambush (2017) explores the effects of military training and culture, while The Last Ambush (2013) explores the effect of traumatic war experiences (63, 163). Both reports also discuss the influence of pre-enlistment factors, such as a troubled childhood and anti-social behaviour. Together, the reports draw on around 250 academic studies, as well as official statistics and veterans’ testimony.



CONCLUSION: THE CASE FOR STRAIGHT EIGHTEEN

A national holiday celebration with French army soldiers and the public, © Directphoto Collection/Alamy

‘[Y]oung people are a vulnerable group, young people go on developing and their development is not yet complete... [T]he main focus should be on protecting those in need of protection. What is important to bear in mind is not the interests of the Bundeswehr [army] but rather the interests of children and young people.’

Dr Tobias Hecker, Department of Psychology, Psychopathology and Clinical Intervention, University of Zurich 2017 (22)

THE HARM OF CHILD RECRUITMENT

This report has reviewed the recruitment of children under the age of 18 for military purposes in affluent, democratic states, subject to the rule of law. All of the states discussed here have, in principle, committed not to use child recruits in hostilities, or to recruit them without their consent, and yet this report has shown how drawing children into military employment, wherever and however it is practised, is pervasively harmful and fundamentally detrimental to their best interests.

Although the voluntary enlistment of 16- and 17-year-olds by state armed forces is not prohibited in international law, as currently practised it contravenes the legal obligations conferred on states by the CRC, OPAC and other treaties.

Child recruitment is inherently detrimental for two main reasons.

First, it exploits the underdeveloped capacity of adolescents to make complex, consequential decisions in an informed and responsible manner. And second, military employment exposes children to multiple hazards, even before they turn 18 and may be sent to war. On these two points alone, there is a clear legal basis in the rights recognised by the CRC to set the threshold for enlistment no lower than 18.

Specifically, the report has shown why the risks of military employment, recruitment practices which obscure these risks, and the developmental vulnerabilities characteristic of adolescent decision-making, are incompatible with the state's duty to ensure that all potential recruits fully comprehend the consequences of enlistment. It summarised evidence from the last decade showing that child recruits, relative to their civilian peers and to older recruits, face a higher risk of mental

health and behaviour problems, and of poorer general health and socioeconomic outcomes in later life. The report also illustrated some of the reasons why a military environment compromises adolescent development and exposes children to disproportionate risk. On all these counts, evidence has pointed to the underdeveloped maturity of child recruits as a critical vulnerability.

Many of the risks associated with military enlistment cited in this report also affect adult recruits, yet there is a clear inverse relation between age and risk, such that the youngest recruits are the most adversely affected. Although rates of maturation vary between individuals of the same age, often widely, research has shown clearly that adults and older adolescents are more resilient to risk, and better able to make complex decisions, than they were as younger adolescents.



Furthermore, even where the risks faced by adult and child recruits are the same or similar, the standards of protection required by law are not. States have specific, additional obligations under international (and often national) law towards children which they do not have in relation to adults. All people below the age of 18 are legally children, entitled to 'special care'.⁶¹ That care includes respect for their views and wishes, but also an appreciation of their specific vulnerabilities, and the need to protect them from exploitation and any course of action which is not in their best interests. To the contrary, children are morally and legally entitled to enjoy an environment conducive to their 'harmonious development', characterised by 'happiness, love and understanding'.⁶²

As shown in this report, military employment meets none of these requirements. At enlistment, children are bound by military law, which restricts certain civil and political rights, including the right to leave a job at will. Their training is a psychologically coercive process, which makes widespread use of punishments

to inculcate loyalty to the military and absolute obedience to orders. The military environment is characterised by elevated rates of alcohol misuse, violent behaviour, and sexual violence and harassment. They are taught to summon animal aggression and direct it lethally at an opponent, and yet in most states are not entitled to buy the *Call of Duty* videogame or watch *The Deer Hunter*.⁶³

A justification of child recruitment based on the best interests of young people would have to present verifiable evidence that the policy provides benefits that adult recruitment or civilian education cannot, and is free from undue risk of harm. It would have to show that the impact on children of this policy has been explicitly assessed, and determined to be in their best interests. This is a legal obligation on states, not subject to any exercise of discretion. Such justification would have to demonstrate that the recruitment of children for military purposes, as practised, does not breach international legal standards, particularly those set out in the CRC. Yet the weight of evidence overwhelmingly indicates that

recruiting children is detrimental to their interests and, as practised, does not meet international legal standards.

THE POSITIVE CASE FOR CHANGE

The substantial majority of states worldwide have a minimum enlistment age in law of at least 18 and almost all of them, with some notable exceptions, abide by it. The majority do so without recourse to conscription, including those whose armed forces are similar in size (as a proportion of the national population) to the states discussed in this report. Evidently, armed forces which still enlist children do so as a policy choice, not a military or demographic necessity.

61. CRC preamble and art 1.

62. CRC preamble.

63. Most editions of the *Call of Duty* series are rated for adults only (aged 18+) in most states in which videogames are regulated including Australia, Japan, and most of Europe. An exception is North America, where the game may be bought by 17-year-olds.

Years of detailed study of the enlistment of minors by the British army have shown that raising the enlistment age to at least 18 would provide marked financial benefits to the armed forces. Military training is financially costly, so a high rate of attrition among the youngest recruits is economically inefficient (207). Recruits who are more mature at enlistment have more realistic expectations and so are less likely to drop out of service early. They need fewer safeguarding measures during training and are more physically resilient, so can complete training more quickly than minors. They are also more likely than child recruits to arrive with a higher standard of education, which obviates the need for remedial education programmes and so further reduces training costs.

International efforts to eradicate the military exploitation of children have made significant progress since the 1996 Machel study. It is easy to forget that the use of children in hostilities, now an aberration, was once routine. The recruitment of children by state armed forces, once seen as inevitable — even beneficial — is now exceptional. In the last two decades, at least 43 states have raised their enlistment age to 18 or above.

The international community has shown itself to be committed to the straight-18 principle in all its efforts to address the exploitation of children in armed conflict. No caveats or grey areas are accepted. The states highlighted in this report have supported, and continue to support, action in this regard but their domestic policies undermine their ability to act as effective advocates for solutions. Major military powers which still routinely recruit and train children lack credibility when

prescribing adult-only armed forces elsewhere.

In the 21st century the boundaries — between recruitment, training, deployment, active participation, direct participation, indirect participation, hostilities, civil unrest, the ‘war on drugs’, the frontline, civilian sites, paramilitary policing, state armed forces and state-allied armed groups — are so blurred that the only certain way to implement their obligations under the OPAC

and CRC is for states not to recruit children at all. A universal minimum enlistment age of 18 — the straight-18 standard — would also be a welcome accomplishment for humanity in a century which has thus far been marked by conflicts that have caused widespread, grievous harm to children and youth. ■

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1)** All states should avoid targeting armed forces recruitment materials and related matter at children below the age of 18.
- 2)** All states should raise the minimum age for voluntary enlistment into the armed forces to at least 18 years. Recruits’ age should be determined by individual birth date, not the year in which the recruit turns 18.
- 3)** All states which practise conscription should ensure, through amending legislation where necessary, that no person can begin military service until after the date of his or her 18th birthday. Exceptions to this rule should be eliminated.
- 4)** All states which allow the armed forces or ministry of defence to operate, or participate in operating, schools for children below the age of 18 should ensure that:
 - a. Students in such schools are recognised as civilians in law, cannot be mobilised under any circumstances, and are not subject to military law.
 - b. Students are not obliged to enlist into the military upon graduation.
 - c. The content of education provided, and the manner in which it is delivered, is consistent with the requirements of Articles 28 and 29 of the CRC. This includes, inter alia, prohibiting physical and other degrading punishments.
- 5)** All states where the armed forces or ministry of defence operate cadet forces for children below the age of 18 should ensure that:
 - a. Cadets are recognised as civilians in law, cannot be mobilised under any circumstances, and are not subject to military law.
 - b. Cadets are not obliged to enlist in the armed forces.
 - c. Cadet force regulations expressly prohibit any form of physical or other degrading treatment or punishment of children participating in cadet activities.

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COUNTRY INDEX

AUSTRALIA

14, 22, 24, 26, 27, 28, 31, 35, 36, 37, 39, 40, 43, 46, 54

AUSTRIA

14, 15, 28, 29, 30, 33, 37

CANADA

6, 12, 13, 15, 22, 23, 37, 39, 43, 47

CHINA.

13, 15

CYPRUS

15, 28, 40, 41

FRANCE

14, 15, 38, 42, 52

GERMANY

14, 17, 19, 21, 22, 27, 39, 41, 42, 43, 47

INDIA

13

ISRAEL

15, 18, 20, 22, 23, 28, 39, 41

ITALY

13

JAPAN

13, 54

MEXICO

22, 23

NETHERLANDS

14, 23, 26, 31, 42

NEW ZEALAND.

14, 20, 22, 28, 33, 40, 44

PAKISTAN

13, 41

RUSSIA

13, 15, 23

UK

6, 7, 9, 13, 14, 15, 16, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 55

US

4, 6, 10, 13, 14, 15, 19, 20, 21, 22, 25, 26, 27, 28, 32, 33, 34, 36, 37, 39, 40, 42, 43, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 51

While the overwhelming majority of states worldwide have accepted the principle that children under the age of 18 should not be used to participate in hostilities, approximately 50 states still recruit children into their armed forces. 'Why 18 Matters' challenges this practice, analysing the military recruitment of children through a child rights based approach and drawing on evidence from epidemiological research, official sources and the testimony of former child recruits.

'Why 18 Matters' highlights the ways in which military training and the military environment are inherently incompatible with many of the rights enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The report shows that the military recruitment of children causes them material harm and as currently practiced, violates relevant international legal standards.

In challenging the conceptualisation of child soldiers as an exclusively conflict-related issue, 'Why 18 Matters' advocates for a universal minimum enlistment age of 18 years as the only approach to military recruitment which fully protects the best interests of the child.

Child Soldiers International was founded in 1998 and works to end the recruitment, use and exploitation of children by armed forces and groups. To achieve our goal, we build community resistance to child recruitment and use, uphold and strengthen crucial laws, policies and standards, and increase pressure on key actors to ensure better protection for children.

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