

## DOES THE MILITARY GIVE YOUNG PEOPLE A 'LEG UP'? THE ARMED FORCES AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

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### INTRODUCTION

Earlier this year, the Ministry of Defence, and Defence Secretary Sir Michael Fallon, praised the social mobility prospects offered by the military.<sup>2</sup> They presented the military as a champion of social mobility for those who enlist in the lower ranks, and for recruits from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds with low educational attainment.

Michael Fallon was referring to figures that show that slightly under a third of officers across the forces progressed from lower ranks; he commended the Potential Officer Development Programme for demonstrating the military's 'commitment to social mobility.'

General Sir Nick Carter, Chief of the General Staff, suggested that social mobility was central to the aims of the Army, stating that, 'The Army is a modern, inclusive employer and I want every recruit to be given the opportunity to fulfil their potential. Second Lieutenant Cousland is a tremendous example of how schemes like this can give those who don't have the best possible start in life a leg up, while helping us maximise the talent of everyone in the Army.'

The Ministry of Defence and Fallon then listed 'a host of other successful education initiatives aimed at being a vehicle for social mobility'.

**This briefing explores if these claims about social mobility stand up to scrutiny or whether enlisting in the armed forces can have a negative impact upon social mobility, particularly for very young recruits.**

### THE PURPOSE OF THE ARMED FORCES

*Presenting themselves as champions of long-term social mobility, or suggesting that it is a one of their core aims, will result in the armed forces compromising the future health, education and career prospects of many young recruits.*

It is important to remember that the military is not a humanitarian or a charitable organisation in any sense. The modus operandi of the armed forces is ultimately not compatible with humanitarian initiatives, either at the level of the individuals employed by them or in the action they are required to take.

To present the military as a safety net for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds detracts from the need to improve awareness about what a military career actually involves, what alternative opportunities are

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1 ForcesWatch scrutinises the ethical basis of the recruitment of young people into the armed forces. We advocate changes to policy, raise public awareness of the issues and challenge the armed forces on their recruitment practices, especially those aimed at the youngest and most disadvantaged groups. See <http://forceswatch.net>

2 Ministry of Defence and The Rt Hon Sir Michael Fallon press release, 16/03/2017, *30% of Officers Progress from the Ranks*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/30-of-officers-progress-from-the-ranks>

available, and the importance of educational achievement even if a military career is chosen.<sup>3</sup> Presenting themselves as champions of long-term social mobility, or suggesting that it is one of their core aims, will result in the armed forces compromising the future health, education and career prospects of many young recruits.

Similarly, depicting the overall mission of the armed forces as being altruistic or humanitarian is propagandistic. It whitewashes the public image of the armed forces and distracts from the other, less palatable aspects of military activity.<sup>4</sup>

There are many organisations carrying out genuine peacebuilding and humanitarian work, and promoting human rights and social justice, as well as youth development and welfare organisations, that are not promoted in civil society and education to the same degree as the military. Such organisations provide an alternative route to the self-development and fulfilment that young people aspire to.

## WHERE IS THE DATA?

Claims made about championing social mobility cannot be backed up by statistical evidence from across service personnel as a whole, because **despite recommendations from the Defence Committee, the Ministry of Defence still do not collect socio-economic data on recruits.**<sup>5</sup>

The Army cannot claim to be a 'vehicle for social mobility' without having data on the socio-economic background of recruits. Individual success stories can be countered by other, less successful stories and are not a substitute for hard facts.

## EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND EARLY SERVICE LEAVERS

*Research by the British Legion has found that the unemployment rate among working-age veterans is approximately twice the civilian rate; a lack of transferable, accredited qualifications in service is a common complaint.*

While Fallon and the Ministry of Defence cited two examples of recruits who enlisted as children who both progressed successfully through a military career - one with low qualifications - the reality is that **early enlistees who complete their training are less likely than adult recruits to be promoted through the ranks.**<sup>6</sup> And although almost a third of officers progressed from lower ranks, **a third of under-18s who enlist in the Army leave or are discharged before completing training.**<sup>7</sup>

**Recruits from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are at the highest risk of 'early' discharge**, defined as leaving the Army within four years of enlistment. Research by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills in 2012 found that recruits who joined the Army without GCSEs, with underdeveloped literacy skills, or because

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3 Armed forces engagement activities in schools can lead to children and young people fixating on a military career and disengaging from their education as they can enlist as a soldier with no formal qualifications. Schools should ensure that pupils are aware of the importance of staying in education and gaining the best qualifications they can, particularly since the average career span in the Army is ten years, and since many who enlist early will leave before completing training.

4 To over-emphasise the role of armed peacekeeping with creating peace also detracts from the need to invest in nonviolent and nonpartisan responses to conflict, grassroots and long-term peacebuilding initiatives and sustainable security approaches - see <https://rethinkingsecurity.org.uk>

5 *Commonsense and Understanding: Recommendations from the Defence Committee's Duty of Care Report That are Still Outstanding 10 Years On*, ForcesWatch 2015, <http://www.forceswatch.net/content/outstanding-duty-of-care-recommendations>

6 Ministry of Defence, *JE vs SE project*, 2010, pp 11-12, accessed 31/07/2016, [http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/404109/Under\\_18s\\_Policy\\_001.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/404109/Under_18s_Policy_001.pdf)

7 The trainee drop-out rate for under-18s averaged 33% between 2009-10 to 2013-14. Calculated from Hansard: HL Deb, 27 April 2016, no. HL 7676. See Child Soldiers International, *The British armed forces: Why raising the recruitment age would benefit everyone*, 2016, <https://www.child-soldiers.org/shop/the-british-armed-forces-why-raising-the-recruitment-age-would-benefit-everyone>

they did not know what else to do, were much more likely than other recruits to be early service leavers.<sup>8</sup> The study also found that recruits who had trained at Army Foundation College Harrogate (AFCH) – that is, the youngest – were much more likely than others to leave within four years. 48% of AFCH's trainees had left early, versus 33% of older recruits (aged 17.5 years and older) who had trained at the Infantry Training Centre in Catterick, for example.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the MoD and Fallon's praise of the educational opportunities available in the military, the Army's provision of education for children is based upon 'Functional Skills' qualifications which are one of the lowest educational qualifications offered in the UK.<sup>10</sup> **Having ended their full-time education, upon leaving the military, those who enlisted early must now either rejoin the education system or find alternative employment without having acquired basic qualifications.**

Even if they do not become early service leavers, the average career span for those who enlisted below the age of 18 within the Army is ten years. Once they leave, they must compete for jobs with civilian peers who remained in full-time education post-16. **Research by the British Legion has found that the unemployment rate among working-age veterans is approximately twice the civilian rate; a lack of transferable, accredited qualifications acquired in service is a common complaint.**<sup>11,12</sup>

## MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

*Rather than giving such recruits 'a leg up', those who were recruited as children face a greater likelihood of death, injury, self-harm, suicide, alcohol abuse and PTSD long-term when compared to those recruited as adults; and experiences of childhood adversity are a pre-service vulnerability leaving recruits particularly vulnerable to all of these risks.*

General Sir Nick Carter spoke of giving 'those who don't have the best possible start in life a leg up'. The figures show that the majority of young Army recruits could fall into this category, at least in terms of educational attainment; among the AFCH intake of under-18s for training in March 2015, 74% had been assessed as having a reading age of 11 or less.<sup>13</sup> Of these, 7% had a reading age as low as five, which is lower than the Army's own minimum entry standard.<sup>14</sup> Entrants to AFCH in 2013 included individuals identified as self-harming, at risk at home, arriving from local authority care or who were already parents themselves.<sup>15</sup>

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8 The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills found that more than 35% of recruits who joined the Army without GCSE Maths or English at any grade, with literacy skills at Entry Level 1, or because they did not know what else to do, left during their first four years. Recruits who joined with better qualifications or literacy, or for whom enlisting was a positive choice, were substantially more likely to stay. The data show that those who arrived in the Army with the least qualifications were the most likely to leave within four years. *BIS Research Paper Number 79: Armed forces basic skills longitudinal study: Part 2* (Table C.1.1), 2012, [http://www.nrdc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/BIS\\_Armed-Forces-BS-Longitudinal-Study-Part-2.pdf](http://www.nrdc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/BIS_Armed-Forces-BS-Longitudinal-Study-Part-2.pdf)

9 See 8.

10 The three subjects available to Junior Soldiers at the Army Foundation College are short, Functional Skills courses in English, maths and ICT at Level 1 with an option to progress to Level 2 in each subject. The Wolf Review of Education described Functional Skills courses as 'conceptually incoherent' and said they 'suffer from major and fundamental flaws'. It also emphasised that Functional Skills Level 2 awards are not equivalent to GCSEs. See Child Soldiers International, *Education in the British army: Comparison with civilian standards for the 16-17 age group*, 2016, <http://www.child-soldiers.org/shop/education-in-the-british-army-2>

11 British Legion, *Deployment to employment: Exploring the veteran employment gap in the UK*, 2016, p. 4, <http://www.britishlegion.org.uk/media/5035/deployment-to-employment.pdf>

12 For example, see SSAFA, *The new frontline: Voices of veterans in need*, 2016, [https://www.ssafa.org.uk/sites/default/files/the\\_new\\_frontline\\_-\\_voices\\_of\\_veterans\\_in\\_need.pdf](https://www.ssafa.org.uk/sites/default/files/the_new_frontline_-_voices_of_veterans_in_need.pdf)

13 Information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, Ref. FOI2015/03426, 21/04/2015, <http://www.child-soldiers.org/freedom-of-information-requests>

14 The Army's minimum standard is Entry Level 2 (equivalent to a 7-8 year old). British Army (recruiting Group), *Eligibility Quick Reference Guide*, 2015, p. 12, <http://www.child-soldiers.org/freedom-of-information-requests>

15 Information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, Ref. FOI2015/04273, 27/05/2015, <http://www.child-soldiers.org/freedom-of-information-requests>

If these recruits stay the course and complete training, the dangers they are likely to face could block any potential benefits to social mobility. **Rather than giving such recruits ‘a leg up’, those who were recruited as children face a greater likelihood of death, injury, self-harm, suicide, alcohol abuse and PTSD long-term when compared to those recruited as adults; and experiences of childhood adversity are a pre-service vulnerability leaving recruits particularly vulnerable to all of these risks.**<sup>16</sup>

*The Ministry of Defence claims to rescue children who ‘don’t have the best start in life’, but seeks to avoid paying compensation when childhood trauma is reactivated in service and leads to PTSD.*

Mental health illnesses like PTSD can have long-term implications and require extensive healthcare.

While Fallon and the Ministry of Defence claim to give a ‘leg up’ to those who ‘don’t have the best start in life’, they also seem to be well aware that childhood trauma, most likely among recruits from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, is a pre-service vulnerability to mental health conditions. In fact, under Fallon the Ministry of Defence has hired psychologists to look into the childhoods of veterans, to try to show that childhood trauma is at the root of their PTSD rather than experiences on the battlefield alone.<sup>17</sup> **The Ministry of Defence claims to rescue children who ‘don’t have the best start in life’, but seeks to avoid paying compensation when childhood trauma is reactivated in service and leads to PTSD.**

*The Guardian* quoted Professor Sir Simon Wessely, the president of the Royal College of Psychiatrists and co-director of the King’s Centre for Military Health Research, as saying:

*“We know that most service personnel don’t come back with mental health problems, though nearly all of them come back as different people. They are changed by their experiences, but that is not a mental health problem. It’s never just about what happens on the battlefield, it’s about an interaction between the people we recruit, what happens to them, and the societies that they come back to. It’s always a combination of all three.”*<sup>18</sup>

**For those concerned about the low age of recruitment in the UK, understanding this ‘interaction’ is vital:**

- *‘The people we recruit’*: the UK is the only country in Europe to recruit 16 year olds and one of only a few to recruit 17 year olds. Many of these young people have not done well at school or come from a disadvantaged background, and many are joining up because they do not know what else to do.<sup>19</sup>
- *‘What happens to them’*: child recruits are more likely than adult recruits to end up in frontline combat roles.<sup>20</sup> Those recruited as children are more vulnerable than adults to long-term health risks including mental health conditions which can contribute to self-harm and violence against others. Those with experiences of childhood adversity in their background are most at risk.<sup>21</sup>
- *‘The societies that they come back to’*: a recent paper by Combat Stress, a veteran’s charity, finds that veterans who are most affected by post-service deprivation are those who are youngest, who are Early Service Leavers, who have a lack of social support and who are Army veterans.<sup>22</sup>

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16 Medact, *The recruitment of children by the UK Armed Forces: a critique from health professionals*, 2016, [http://www.medact.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/medact\\_childrecruitment\\_17-oct\\_WEB.pdf](http://www.medact.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/medact_childrecruitment_17-oct_WEB.pdf)

17 Patrick Christys, *The Express*, 28/02/2017, ‘Why are MoD shrinks investigating childhoods of battle scarred PTSD suffering soldiers’, <http://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/773251/Armed-Forces-military-Ministry-of-Defence-Michael-Fallon-PTSD-Iraq-War-Rhicha-Kapila>

18 Holly Watt, *The Guardian*, ‘More than 2,500 former soldiers jailed last year’, 18/03/2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/mar/18/uk-armed-forces-veterans-prison-population-mental-health-issues>

19 See 8.

20 Recruiters guidelines state that those under 16.5 years must be given roles in combat or as drivers in the logistics corps. See UK Army Recruiting Group, *Eligibility Quick Reference Guide*, June 2015, available at [http://childsoldiers.org/research\\_report\\_reader.php?id=82](http://childsoldiers.org/research_report_reader.php?id=82)

21 See 16.

22 Combat Stress, *Multiple deprivation in help-seeking UK veterans*, Dr Dominc Murphy, Emily Palmer & Rachel Ashwick, 2017, <http://www.combatstress.org.uk/media/366857/Multiple%20Deprivation%20Report%20pdf.pdf>

## INVOLVEMENT IN CRIMINAL OFFENCES

Mental health conditions connected with a military career, to which those who enlist as children are the most vulnerable, can also lead to criminality. It was recently reported in *The Guardian* that over 2,500 veterans entered the prison system last year, with experts warning that 'a disproportionate number were being jailed for serious violence and sexual offences.'<sup>23</sup> The Ministry of Justice states that veterans represent between 4% and 5% of the UK prison population, and Frances Cook, the chief executive of the Howard League stated:

*'Members of the armed forces represent about 5% of the prison population, but they represent a disproportionate number of serious violent offences and sexual offences, and that raises questions that need answering. These are not victimless crimes. They have a terrible effect on the victim.'*<sup>24</sup>

**Cook said that several factors contributed to the number of veterans entering the prison system, including alcohol abuse and post-traumatic stress disorder.**

## THE ARMED FORCES INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATION

*The armed forces and the arms industry, or those representing them, should not be given disproportionate access to school children, especially in areas of social deprivation.*

**If the Ministry of Defence were really committed to social mobility, then they would raise the minimum age of recruitment to 18 years**, in line with recommendations from child rights advocates, including the Children's Commissioners in the four countries of the UK.<sup>25</sup> This would ensure that children stay in full-time education until they reach 18, giving them better prospects when they leave the armed forces.

Meanwhile, the significant emphasis placed on defence interests during careers activities in schools and colleges through STEM education, employer visits to schools, and in University Technical Colleges and other career-led schools and colleges, risks presenting young people with a limited, rather than expanded, range of opportunities.

**The various authorities who are responsible for education in the UK should ensure a realistic representation of a career in the armed forces**, with all its risks, legal obligations and ethical challenges.<sup>26</sup> **They must also ensure that school pupils are exposed to a wide range of career and apprenticeship providers.** While armed forces apprenticeships and careers are promoted in schools, a recent study showed that many pupils in Scotland are not being made aware of the many other work-based educational opportunities on offer.<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, **the armed forces and the arms industry, or those representing them, should not be given disproportionate access to schools, especially in areas of social deprivation.** Data, where available, suggests that the armed forces are given access far above other employment sectors for careers activities.<sup>28</sup>

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23 See 18.

24 See 18.

25 Child Soldiers International, Letter to Penny Morduant MP, 23/05/2016, <https://www.child-soldiers.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=47932680-1531-498c-abe1-826acab81a37>

26 See the petition presented to the Scottish Parliament by ForcesWatch and Quakers in Scotland, <https://www.forceswatch.net/content/scottish-parliament-petition>

27 A recent study suggests information about apprenticeships is not distributed well in schools in Scotland. One in ten students said they thought apprenticeships offered no recognised qualification, while 87% underestimated salary. One in three said information about opportunities at their school or college was poor or non-existent. [http://www.heraldsotland.com/news/14310096.Pay\\_misconceptions\\_putting\\_school\\_leavers\\_off\\_apprenticeships/](http://www.heraldsotland.com/news/14310096.Pay_misconceptions_putting_school_leavers_off_apprenticeships/)

28 ForcesWatch, *Armed Forces Visits to Secondary Schools in Scotland*, 2014 <https://www.forceswatch.net/resources/armed-forces-visits-secondary-schools-scotland>

Careers-led education, such as that offered by University Technical Colleges (which cater for 14-18 year olds and offer a mix of academic and industry-based education) and curriculum activities in mainstream schools, risk placing disproportionate emphasis on defence employers. A submission from Scientists for Global Responsibility to Scotland's Public Petitions Committee states that, 'available evidence from teachers and organisational websites suggests that the armed forces are among the larger providers of science education activities and resources'. This is disproportionate to the percentage of science and engineering graduates who are employed in the defence industry.<sup>29, 30</sup>

**A high level of involvement of the armed forces and arms industry in STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) education in schools could skew children's knowledge about the range of available career opportunities.** Schools concerned with social mobility – and with educating for sustainability – must ensure that industries with a mainly destructive impact on the environment, such as the military and fossil fuels industry, do not have more influence on STEM education than conservationists, and representatives from green energy, technology and science industries. Industries are increasingly shifting in this direction; workforces of future generations must be equipped to enter green fields.<sup>31</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The military's engagement with children and young people, as well as parents and wider society, focuses almost exclusively on the potential benefits of an armed forces career. Claiming to be a champion of social mobility for the most vulnerable children and young people in our society is one example of this. It taps into the concerns of policy-makers, parents and young people themselves, and gains support by conforming to stated governmental priorities around education and careers for young people.

Despite a number of government initiatives around social mobility, other policies resulting in the loss of education maintenance allowance, disabled students' allowance and mental health services, have harmed the prospects of many young people.<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile, since 2012 nearly £90 million of new funding has been found for military-related programmes in schools, as the government promotes the idea that the military can solve complex social problems, and seeks to attract recruits.<sup>33</sup> Given the often negative way in which entering the armed forces at an early age or from a socio-economically disadvantaged background can impact a young person's prospects, it is unlikely that promoting the military in education will provide the solution the government are looking for.

Those who are truly concerned with social mobility must challenge the promotion of the military within education in particular and call for a rise in the minimum recruitment age to 18. Young people from all backgrounds must be given a greater range of opportunities and the myth that the armed forces will guarantee a rewarding and long-term career must not be allowed to prevail.

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29 Scientists for Global Responsibility Letter of 17 January 2017 to the Scottish Parliament, [http://www.parliament.scot/S5\\_PublicPetitionsCommittee/Submissions%202017/PE1603\\_DD\\_SGR.pdf](http://www.parliament.scot/S5_PublicPetitionsCommittee/Submissions%202017/PE1603_DD_SGR.pdf)

30 See for example, Royal Navy, 14/03/2017, '90,000 children set to see nationwide schools science and engineering roadshow this year', <http://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news-and-latest-activity/news/2016/march/14/160314-90000-children-set-to-see-science-roadshow>

31 Rhianna Louise and Dr Jan Maskell, *Huffington Post*, 'Do you Know the Agenda Behind Your School's STEM provision?' 14/03/2017, [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/rhianna-louise/do-you-know-the-agenda-be\\_b\\_15244996.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/rhianna-louise/do-you-know-the-agenda-be_b_15244996.html)

32 Natalie Gil, *The Guardian*, 'Robbed of their futures: how austerity cuts hit young people hardest', 17/11/2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/nov/17/robbed-of-their-futures-how-austerity-cuts-hit-young-people-hardest>

33 ForcesWatch, *Government funding for 'military ethos' in schools*, 04/11/2015, <http://forceswatch.net/news/government-funding-military-ethos-schools>