Army recruiters visit London's poorest schools most often

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Summary

The British Regular Army visits schools as a major part of its recruitment programme and a third of new soldier recruits are aged under 18. These recruits may face serious personal risk and challenging moral dilemmas, yet their terms of service can prevent them from leaving the army for up to six years. Given that minors are less able than adults to make free, informed and responsible decisions about enlisting, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and the House of Commons/Lords Joint Committee on Human Rights have recommended raising the minimum age of recruitment to 18. Both Committees also recommend that the UK ensure that disadvantaged communities are not targeted for recruitment.

These concerns raise ethical questions about allowing the army to use schools to recruit, particularly those containing students from disadvantaged communities. Focusing on the Greater London area we investigated 1) the proportion of mainstream state secondary schools visited by army recruiters between September 2008 and April 2009 and 2) how this proportion varied by school socio-economic disadvantage, measured using the percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals. We found that army recruiters visited 40% of schools. Army recruiters were particularly likely to visit the most disadvantaged schools: 51% in the most disadvantaged fifth were visited vs. 29% in the middle fifth and 40% of schools in the richest fifth (p=0.01).

We believe the large proportion of army visits to schools, particularly the most disadvantaged, may put minors at risk and merits wider debate.

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Background

The Army makes around 4,000 visits to schools each year (MoD, 2008b:168). In October 2008 Bob Ainsworth, then Minister of State for the Armed Forces, claimed that such visits were not to recruit but only to "offer advice on service careers" (Hansard HC, 2008). The Ministry of Defence Youth Policy contradicts this, stating that visits to educational establishments are a "powerful tool for facilitating recruitment" (MoD, 2005:5) and elsewhere the MoD has described a primary purpose of schools visits "to enable recruiters to access the school environments" (MoD, 2008b:167). Indeed, most visits by the Armed Forces to schools are by Single Service teams (e.g. army teams), composed of "mostly recruiters" (MoD, 2008b: Ev167). In 2008, Major General Andrew Gregory, Director-General of Personnel (Army) reported that "army recruiting teams ... go into schools" (HC Defence Committee, 2008: Ev42). There is therefore abundant evidence that army visits to schools form a major part of its marketing and recruitment campaign.

In 2008-09 the army enlisted 13,355 regular soldiers (i.e. non-officers), of whom 4,130 (31%) were aged under 18 (MoD, 2009b). Whilst a career as a soldier can offer unusual opportunities, it also involves a combination of risks, difficulties and ethical issues which is unfamiliar in civilian life (Gee, 2008). Moreover, soldiers' terms of service are complex and restrictive. Once their first six months after enlistment have passed, under-18s normally have no legal right to leave regular service until their 22nd birthday (Army Terms of Service Regulations, 2007).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child places all UK public institutions, including the government, schools and the armed forces, under a legal obligation to ensure that "[in] all actions concerning children [those aged under 18] … the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration" (1989: Article 3). In this connection, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has called upon the UK to review the policy of recruiting under-18s into the armed forces and expressed concern that "[the] active recruitment policy may lead to the possibility of targeting those children who come from vulnerable groups" (2008:3). The Committee has also called upon the UK to "ensure that [recruitment into the armed forces] does not occur in a manner which specifically targets ethnic minorities and children of low-income families" (2008:3). The House of Commons and House of Lords Joint Committee on Human Rights recently endorsed these recommendations (2009:47-48). While military recruitment of under-18s continues, the UK is legally obliged to ensure that this is "genuinely voluntary" and that applicants are "fully informed of the duties involved in such military service" (CRC OPAC, 2000: Article 3).

There are reasons to doubt that potential soldier recruits are empowered to make genuinely free, fully informed, and maturely responsible choices about whether to enlist:

1. A third of new soldier recruits are aged under 18 (31% in 2008-09: MoD, 2009b). Under-18s are generally considered in law to be less able than adults to make decisions that involve significant risk and/or binding commitment; for example, under-18s are not permitted to vote, buy alcohol or tobacco, or sign a contract in England and Wales, nor may they join any of the civil emergency services. Although under-18s require parental consent for enlistment

into the armed forces, this is not necessarily an adequate safeguard: many army recruits' parents sign the consent form without having met with recruiters (Gee, 2008:53). The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has expressed its concern to the UK that parents and guardians are not sufficiently involved in the recruitment process (2008:3).

2. Educational attainment among soldiers is much lower than the national average (MoD, 2004),[3] indicating that recruits come disproportionately from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (DCSF, 2009:31) and are at increased risk of social exclusion (Agulnik *et al.*, 2002). This is reflected in the fact that, although some young people join the army to fulfil a long-held ambition, many enlist as a last resort after failing to find a civilian job of choice (HC Defence Committee, 2005).

3. The terms of service for the army are complex and legally binding; absence without leave is punishable by a custodial sentence. Yet evidence from personnel support services indicates that recruits often misunderstand their legal obligations (At Ease, 2007; HC Defence Committee, 2005:Ev109), suggesting that many did not make fully informed decisions to enlist.

4. A large proportion of army recruits find life in the army worse than they expected and on average soldiers have lower rates of job satisfaction than civilians. A Ministry of Defence survey of soldiers in 2008 indicated that 40% of soldiers found army life to be worse than expected (23% better than expected, 37% about the same) (2009a: B-11). The same survey found that 50% of soldiers were satisfied with army life (23% neutral, 26% dissatisfied) (2009a: B-10). By contrast, 65% of British workers in the general population were found to be satisfied with their jobs in a representative survey in 2009 (18% neutral, 17% dissatisfied) (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development 2009:5).[4]

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3   The army does not collect data on the socio-economic background of recruits (British Army, 2009). However, in 2008-09 only 8.9% of new soldier recruits with recorded grades for English GCSE had passed at Grade A*-C, compared with a national average of 61% (53% for boys and 69% for girls) in England in the same year (DCSF, 2008).

4   The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development studied job satisfaction across the employment market as a whole rather than the more limited market accessible to school-leavers with low academic qualifications. However, other studies have found that job satisfaction among low-paid civilians is similar to the national average (e.g. Pouliakas and Theodossiou, 2005). Job satisfaction in the UK also showed little variation by age, marital status or other variables which would distinguish typical army recruits.

Study aim

To summarise, soldier recruits may face serious personal risk and challenging ethical dilemmas; are generally more likely than civilians to experience career dissatisfaction; and are bound by terms of service which may prevent them from leaving the army for a minimum of between four and six years. This raises ethical questions for army recruitment in schools, especially those containing students from disadvantaged communities.

We therefore investigated:

1) The proportion of mainstream state secondary schools visited by army recruiters; and

2) Whether this proportion varied by school characteristics, and in particular by the school's level of socio-economic disadvantage.

Given the socio-economic situation of most soldier recruits, we hypothesised that the proportion of visits would be highest in the most disadvantaged schools.

Methods

We used the Freedom of Information Act to obtain a list from the Army Recruiting and Training Division of every school in Greater London visited by recruiters between September 2008 and April 2009. We matched this to information from the Department of Children Schools and Families on every school in London. This included data on the percentage of students eligible for free school meals in January 2009, which is a widely used measure of the level of socio-economic disadvantage in a school (DfES, 2005). It also included information on the phase of education of the school (primary vs. secondary), the number of students in the school (banded to the nearest 100 pupils) and the sex of the school (boys, girls or mixed school).

In our analyses, we focussed on mainstream state secondary schools – i.e. excluding primary schools, independent schools, special needs schools or pupil referral units. We divided these mainstream state secondary schools into fifths according to the percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals, in order to examine the link between school socio-economic disadvantage and the probability of an army recruiter visit. We excluded the small number of schools (N=10) visited by the army which we could not match definitively because of ambiguities in their name. We then examined whether there was evidence of an association between the probability of an army visit and schools' size, sex or level of socio-economic disadvantage. We first examined whether there was evidence for each of these associations separately.[5] We then examined which characteristics continued to show an association with the probability of an army visit, after taking account of the school's other characteristics.[6]

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5   Using univariable chi-squared tests for heterogeneity.
6   Using multivariable logistic regression analyses. We entered all school characteristics into the logistic regression model as unordered categorical variables, to examine effects which might not be linear.

Results

40% of mainstream state secondary schools in London (n=170/425) were visited by army recruiters between September 2008 and April 2009 (Table 1). The percentage of schools visited varied according to the percentage of students eligible for free school meals in the school: 51% in the most disadvantaged fifth of all mainstream state secondary schools were visited, compared with 29% in the middle fifth and 40% of schools in the richest fifth (Figure 1). This variation was statistically significant (χ^2_4=12.7, p=0.01), meaning that it is unlikely to be due to chance. The same pattern emerged when we used 'number of army visits' instead of 'any army visit' to take account of the fact that 71 schools were visited more than once. There was no evidence that the sex of the school affected the probability of a visit by army recruiters, but some evidence that the smallest schools were less likely to be visited (Table 1). This did not explain the variation observed by schools' socio-economic disadvantage, however, which persisted after adjusting for the school's size and sex.

In addition to these visits to mainstream state secondary schools, the army also reported visits by recruiters to 3 London primary schools; 3 community special schools; 2 pupil referral units; 35 Further Education colleges; and 6 independent schools. These 6 independent schools represent 2% of the 284 independent schools in London accepting students aged 12 or above, or 7% of the 92 independent schools containing at least 400 pupils.

Table 1: Probability of a visit by army recruiters according to school's characteristics in London schools, September 2008 – April 2009

		Visits by army recruiters			
		No. schools visited	Percent visited (95% confidence interval)	Unadjusted p-value †	Adjusted p-value †
ALL SCHOOLS		170/425	40.0 (35.3, 44.8)	-	-
Socio-economic disadvantage	**Fifth 1 (least disadvantaged)**	34/85	40.0 (29.5, 51.2)	0.01	0.009
	Fifth 2	27/85	31.8 (22.1, 42.8)		
	Fifth 3	25/85	29.4 (20.0, 40.3)		
	Fifth 4	41/85	48.2 (37.2, 59.3)		
	Fifth 5 (most disadvantaged)	43/85	50.6 (39.5, 61.6)		
Sex of school	**Boys**	19/54	35.2 (22.7, 49.4)	0.20	0.17
	Girls	27/82	32.9 (22.9, 44.2)		
	Mixed	124/289	42.9 (37.1, 48.8)		
Size of school	**≤600 pupils**	8/39	20.5 (9.3, 36.5)	0.08	0.05
	601-800 pupils	34/71	47.9 (35.9, 60.1)		
	801-1000 pupils	37/87	42.5 (32.0, 53.6)		
	1001-1200 pupils	39/89	43.8 (33.3, 54.7)		
	1201-1400 pupils	26/71	36.6 (25.4, 48.9)		
	≥1401 pupils	26/68	38.2 (26.7, 50.8)		

† Unadjusted p-values from univariable chi-squared tests; adjusted p-values from multivariable logistic regression analyses, entering all factors in the table. All p-values are tests for heterogeneity.

Figure 1: Probability of a visit by army recruiters according to school's level of socio-economic disadvantage in London schools, September 2008 – April 2009
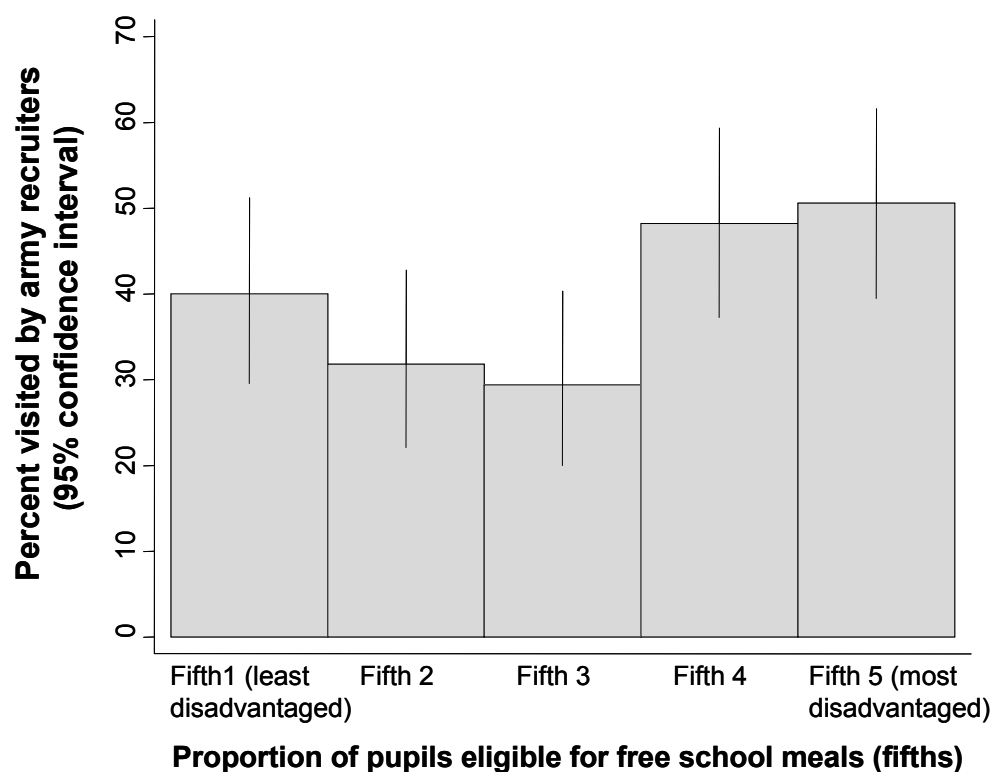
Discussion

Army recruiters visited 40% of London's mainstream state secondary schools between September 2008 and April 2009, and were particularly likely to visit the most disadvantaged schools. Recruiters also visited small numbers of other establishments, including three primary schools.

The higher proportion of visits by army recruiters to disadvantaged schools may reflect both school actions and army actions. Since students from disadvantaged communities are more likely to leave school with low qualifications and reduced career options, it is plausible that their schools are more likely to approach Army Careers Advisers.   Yet we believe army actions are also likely to be important, and may indeed be the stronger of the two contributors. This is because although an army visit is contingent on the school's consent, in practice it is more usual for the army to initiate the relationship (MoD, 2008b:Ev169). Furthermore, while the army has no explicit policy on prioritising visits to particular sorts of schools (British Army, 2009), it does deploy recruitment resources strategically (HC Defence Committee, 2008: Ev56-57) based largely on "econometric data and demographics" (MoD, 2008a: Ev100). If army recruiters do prefer to visit schools in disadvantaged communities this would be at odds with the recommendation of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child that the UK ensure that low-income groups are not being targeted (2008:3).

Irrespective of the causal factors involved, the disproportionate number of recruitment visits to the most disadvantaged schools raises ethical questions for both schools and army recruiters. By disproportionately visiting the most disadvantaged schools, recruiters are engaging the social group that is potentially the least able to make a fully informed and maturely responsible choice about enlisting. This may undermine the government's legal obligation to ensure that recruitment of under-18s into the armed forces is "genuinely voluntary" (CRC OPAC, 2000: Article 3). Further, whilst young people from the most disadvantaged schools may be particularly vulnerable, the risk applies to some degree to all under-18s of all socio-economic backgrounds.

We therefore conclude that the army's recruitment activities in schools risk jeopardising the rights and future welfare of the young people contacted. Given that schools have a special duty of care for the well-being of their students, we believe that teachers, head teachers, and teaching bodies will want to weigh these issues carefully when deciding whether to accept approaches from army recruiters.

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