

# Conscription by poverty?

Deprivation and army  
recruitment in the UK



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# Acknowledgements

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Illustrations by Miriam Sugranyes.

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# Contents

Executive summary	4
<b>1. Introduction</b>	8
<b>2. Military enlistment linked to deprivation</b>	10
<b>3. Socioeconomic targeting in recruitment policy and practice</b>	15
<b>4. Impact of early enlistment on social mobility</b>	18
<b>5. Better prospects for young people</b>	27
<b>6. Conclusion and recommendations</b>	29

# Executive summary

## Introduction

Each year the British armed forces enlist over 2,000 children aged 16 and 17, mostly for the army and particularly for the infantry; more new army recruits are 16 than any other age. The United Kingdom (UK) is the only State in Europe and among only a few worldwide allowing enlistment at age 16.

Recruits are no longer routinely sent to war until they turn 18, but the impact of military employment at a young age, particularly on recruits from a stressful childhood background, has raised numerous human rights and public health concerns. Among those to express concern have been the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, the children's commissioners for the four jurisdictions of the UK, and the Joint Committee on Human Rights.

## Young army recruits tend to come from particularly deprived backgrounds

The Ministry of Defence (MoD) does not collect information about the socioeconomic profile of armed forces personnel. Nonetheless, our research has found that army recruits under the age of 18 come disproportionately from England's poorest constituencies. During a five-year period, the rate of recruitment in the age group was 57 percent higher in the most deprived fifth of constituencies than the least deprived. Recruitment was concentrated in the poorest regions, particularly urban fringe areas of the north of the country.

Research by King's College London further shows that a troubled childhood is common among army personnel (irrespective of age), while official data show that the youngest recruits tend to have severely underdeveloped literacy. Childhood adversity and poor literacy are both well-attested statistical indicators of socioeconomic deprivation.

## The army focuses recruitment in the poorest parts of society

Using official sources, our research has shown that army recruitment is targeted at the UK's poorest towns and cities, particularly neighbourhoods where annual family income is around £10,000.

While recruitment marketing presents military jobs as thrilling, the official annual survey of soldiers in 2019 found that only 44 percent were satisfied with army life in general, well below the 69 percent satisfaction rate in a similar survey of civilian workers.

## **Evidence does not support army and government claims that enlistment enhances social mobility**

Ministers and senior army officers repeatedly argue that enlistment enhances the social mobility of young people from deprived backgrounds, but have yet to substantiate this with evidence beyond anecdote. The available evidence strongly indicates that enlisting at age 16 is detrimental to the socio-economic prospects of young people, for the following reasons:

- Four-fifths of the most economically-deprived 16-year-olds in England now continue in full-time education. Education for the army's youngest recruits is rudimentary, falling below the minimum standards that govern civilian schools and colleges. GCSE resits are not offered to recruits. Ofsted inspects the duty of care arrangements but not the quality and suitability of the education offered.
- The drop out, or attrition, rate among the youngest army recruits, at around 32 percent, is substantially higher than in a civilian college, where the average rate is 9 percent. The large number of young soldiers who leave education to join the army, only to drop out during training, are left out of work and education.
- The initial training of the youngest recruits is an intentionally coercive process, which according to the army involves "all-round degradation". Stressors include harsh discipline, sleep deprivation, exhaustion, and isolation from friends and family. Stress-related problems in the British military, such as anxiety and depression, are twice as common as in civilian life, as is harmful drinking. Research has also found that the rate of violent and drug-related offending tends to increase after enlistment, even before personnel are sent to war (when it increases again). Young people in mid-adolescence, particularly those with a stressful childhood background, are particularly susceptible to the adverse effects of prolonged stress.

## **The army targets the youngest age group for the riskiest army jobs**

The army's rationale for targeting 16-year-olds for recruitment is to compensate for shortfalls in adult recruitment, "particularly for the infantry";

the close-combat troops. Its own research confirms that a lack of economically viable civilian opportunities is one of the main factors driving enlistment for the infantry, which can be joined without any qualifications. The army's youngest recruits are therefore substantially over-represented there. The infantry carries the greatest risks in war. In Afghanistan, British infantry troops were six times as likely to be killed as personnel in the rest of the army, and in the Iraq and Afghanistan era, they were twice as likely to experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Relative to the rest of the army, infantry training is basic and, according to veterans, more brutalising, with twice the drop-out rate among trainees, at approximately 35 percent.

## **Conclusion**

The best interests of adolescent children do not lie in joining an organisation that provides a lower standard of education than civilian schools or colleges, imposes obligations which would be unlawful in civilian life, uses a coercive and continuously stressful training regime, and suffers a low rate of job satisfaction and a high rate of attrition. These factors are unambiguously incompatible with the fundamental rights and welfare of children and young people, particularly those from deprived backgrounds.

This report has presented the case that, whereas full-time civilian education is largely effective as a route to social mobility for young people from deprived backgrounds, enlistment from age 16 tends to be detrimental. Enlistment is not the only economically viable option available to a young person and, in a healthy society, nor should it ever be so.



# 1 • Introduction

## Military recruitment of young people in the UK

The UK is one of only 16 countries globally to allow direct enlistment into the armed forces from age 16; it is the only country in Europe and the only NATO member still to do so. Three-quarters of States worldwide no longer formally allow the recruitment of children, defined by the Convention on the Rights of the Child as people under the age of 18.<sup>1</sup>

In recent years an average of 2,400 16- and 17-year-olds have joined the UK armed forces each year, of whom three quarters joined the army.<sup>2</sup> More British soldiers are now recruited at 16 than at any other age.<sup>3</sup>

Relative to the navy and air force, the British army has relied heavily on recruiting adolescent children; in the 2000s, 16- and 17-year-olds regularly made up 40 percent of the army's intake. The proportion declined to approximately 22 percent in 2015-16, but has since begun to rise again, reaching 29 percent in 2018-19.<sup>4</sup>

The army's dependence on adolescent children is highly unusual internationally. While some other high-income countries recruit from age 17, the large majority of new personnel are adults.<sup>5</sup>

Since the UK's ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC), military personnel under the age of 18 are no longer normally deployed in active combat.<sup>6</sup> Despite this protection, their enlistment has been criticised by independent UN experts as incompatible with several rights recognised by the Convention on the Rights of the Child and OPAC.<sup>7</sup> Public health bodies have also raised concerns about the health impacts of joining the armed forces at this age.<sup>8</sup> In defence of recruiting children, ministers and senior officers claim that the low enlistment age provides opportunities to young people that might otherwise be denied them.<sup>9</sup>

## About this report

This report examines the link between the recruitment of young people and socioeconomic deprivation, and its implications.



This issue warrants investigation because there is evidence that socioeconomically deprived young people are intentionally targeted by the army and disproportionately represented in its ranks. There is also strong evidence that this group may be adversely affected by their experience of military employment, and that the recruitment policy undermines their best interests.

The report also uses the available evidence to test claims that early enlistment enhances the “social mobility” of young people with a background of deprivation. This claim is central to the UK government’s official justifications of continuing to recruit from age 16.

The first section of the report reviews the evidence that this social group is overrepresented in the army. The second section looks at the recruitment practices and policies that contribute to this socio-economic profile. The third section discusses the impact that military enlistment has on young people, especially those from a deprived background. Finally, the report makes some conclusions about army recruitment and makes recommendations for change.

*Note:*

The report focuses on the army rather than the navy and air force, because the army enlists the greatest number of personnel under the age of 18, and concerns over the health and socioeconomic impacts of enlistment also apply most strongly to the army.

## 2. Military enlistment linked to deprivation

This section shows that:

- 16- and 17-year-olds from deprived backgrounds are disproportionately represented in the army's ranks.
- Deprivation is a factor driving young people to enlist.

### Do the army's recruits come from poorer backgrounds?

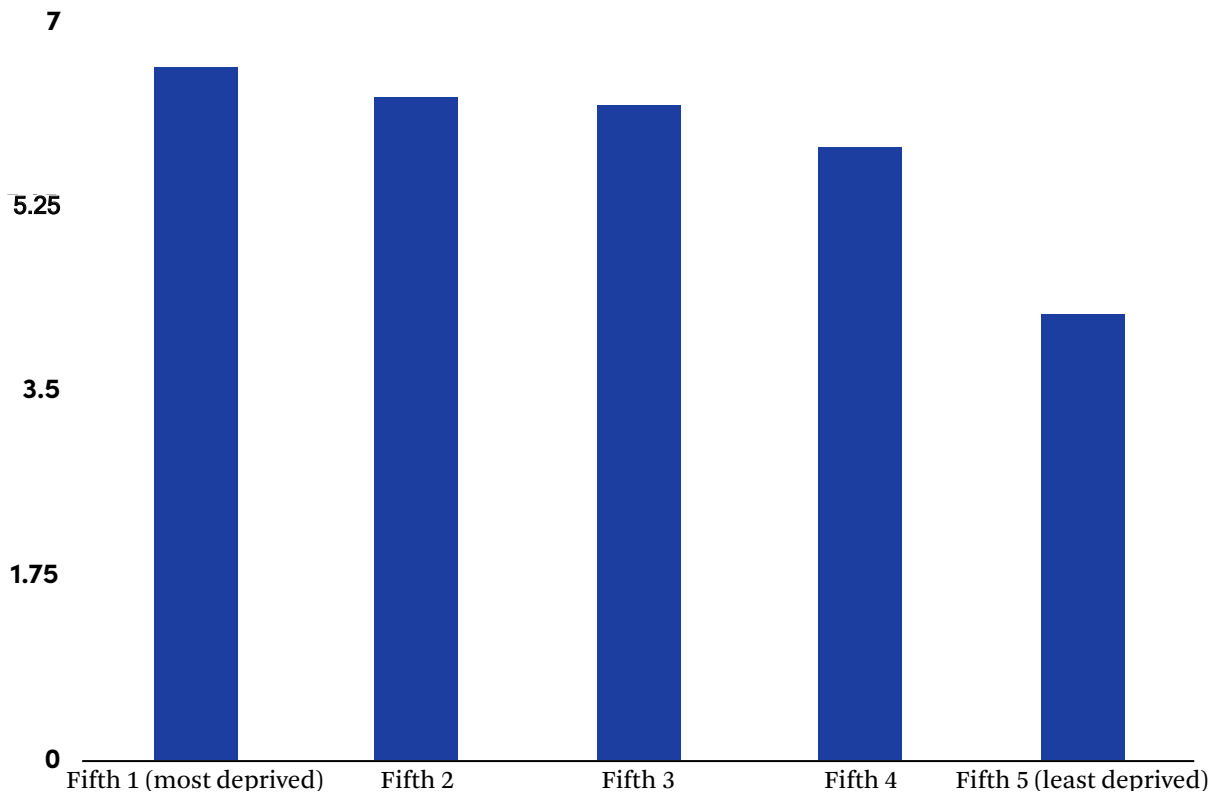
Contrary to longstanding recommendations made by the parliamentary Defence Committee,<sup>10</sup> the Ministry of Defence does not collect information on the socioeconomic profile of its recruits.<sup>11</sup> However, the available evidence confirms the widely-made assumption that enlisted soldiers tend to come from deprived backgrounds, in contrast to officer cadets who tend to come from particularly privileged backgrounds.<sup>12</sup> Some evidence indicates also that young people who leave full-time education at age 16 or 17 to join the army tend to be particularly under-privileged, as discussed below.

Our own research into the army's recruitment in England from 2013 to 2018 has found a correlation with socioeconomic deprivation. During the five-year period, recruits aged under 18 came disproportionately from the most deprived constituencies. Specifically, the rate of recruitment was 57 percent higher in the most-deprived fifth of constituencies, relative to the least-deprived fifth (see Fig. 1). Young recruits tended to come from areas in the north of England, particularly the urban fringe areas of major cities, while relatively few came from London and the south-east (see Fig. 2).<sup>13</sup> Although the study does not show conclusively that recruits themselves experienced deprivation, it does show that they tended to be recruited from poorer areas and regions.

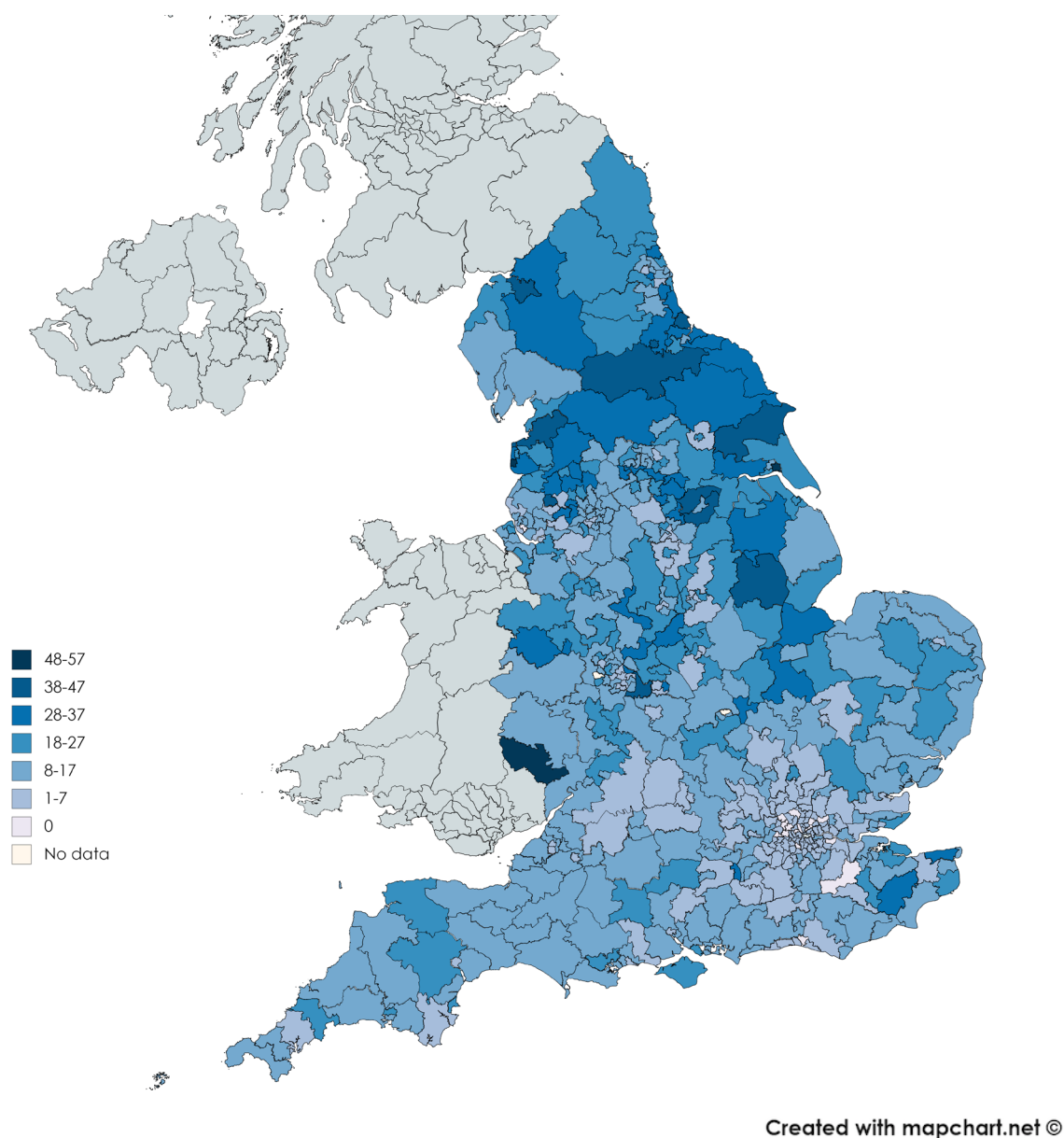
Other characteristics of recruits further indicate that the youngest soldiers come disproportionately from deprived backgrounds. One is their level of educational attainment. For example, in 2015 only three percent of the intake at the army training institution for under-18s were assessed as having literacy skills at Level 2 - the expected level of attainment for the age group. Three-quarters had literacy skills at Entry Level 3 or below (equivalent to a reading age of 11 years or less).<sup>14</sup>

Adverse childhood experiences are also common among enlisted armed forces personnel (irrespective of age at enlistment). A major study of male personnel in 2007 found that experiences of adversity while growing up, such as difficult family relationships and getting into trouble at school or with the police, were particularly common among young male soldiers.<sup>15</sup> As the same study noted, these experiences are often associated with socioeconomically-deprived neighbourhoods.<sup>16</sup>

**Figure 1:** 16- and 17-year-olds enlisted from England into the British army (per 1,000 in population), by socioeconomic deprivation of constituency (April 2013 to April 2018).



**Figure 2:** Map showing 16- and 17-year-olds enlisted into the British army in English constituencies (April 2013 to April 2018)



Human rights authorities have drawn attention to the socioeconomic profile of British armed forces recruits.<sup>17</sup> The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child noted critically in 2016 that “children who come from vulnerable groups are disproportionately represented among recruits”. This is only rarely acknowledged officially in the UK. Ministers accept that “[a] number of those joining have had a deprived childhood”, for example, but not that their recruitment is disproportionate.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, the evidence is clear that young army recruits have disproportionately had associated experiences of low educational attainment, adversity in earlier life, and socioeconomic deprivation.

## How does deprivation drive enlistment?

A lack of opportunities for work and development, and/or a drive to “escape” deprivation, account in part for the overrepresentation of young people from poor backgrounds in the army’s ranks. Research commissioned by the army in 2009 into infantry recruits’ (of all ages) reasons for signing up found that “a lack of other options” was one of the key reasons, along with “adventure” and “personal development”.<sup>19</sup> Conversely, fewer young people who enjoy a wider range of options for education and employment choose to enlist. Accordingly, when the range of civilian options increases, enlistment rates tend to fall. The Army Recruiting Group, for example, has noted that a low unemployment rate, fast wage growth, and increasing participation in full-time education until age 18 are key factors behind a “highly challenging environment” for recruiting.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, in his review of recruitment challenges, Mark Francois MP noted:

*The Armed Forces have traditionally benefited from periods of high unemployment, with Service in the Forces often seen as a “way out” from deprived communities. The near record level of those in employment has depressed this source of recruits for the forces.*<sup>21</sup>

Testimony from recruits themselves also indicates that a lack of meaningful alternatives influenced their decision to sign up. For example, one 16-year-old who had experienced a difficult childhood told a documentary about the army’s youngest recruits: “I am extremely stressed pretty much all the time...because I have nothing else to go back on if I leave here.”<sup>22</sup> Recruits’ hopes that the army will be an adventure are also linked to their experience of deprivation; for example:

*It’s exciting isn’t it? Before this I was just hanging around my estate at home. It was boring, just doing the same stuff all the time.*<sup>23</sup>

The disproportionate representation of young people from more deprived backgrounds in the army complicates recruiters’ legal duty to ensure that child recruits and their parents meaningfully consent to enlistment. According to the OPAC treaty, States that enlist minors must ensure that “such recruitment is genuinely voluntary” and “such persons are fully informed of the duties involved”.<sup>24</sup> If enlistment is driven by economic pressure, genuine consent - based on a free choice - could be undermined. This risk is increased by low literacy among the youngest recruits. Relative to adults, young people in mid-adolescence are also less able to make long-term decisions, particularly when a choice is presented as thrilling and the risks and obligations are not made clear.<sup>25</sup> Those who have experienced a stressful childhood are particularly likely to make consequential decisions (such as the choice to enlist) based on emotive appeal rather than rational evaluation.<sup>26</sup>

As this section has shown, a lack of viable alternative economic opportunities for young people from poor backgrounds influences their decision to enlist in disproportionate numbers. The next chapter will show that the army is aware of these pressures, and intentionally exploits them in its recruitment processes.

# 3. Socioeconomic targeting in recruitment policy and practice

This section shows that:

- Socioeconomically deprived young people are intentionally targeted by military recruiters.
- This policy is driven by recruitment targets.

## How and why does the army target deprived young people?

The marketing of military careers is sophisticated and well-resourced; over £27 million was spent on armed forces recruitment campaigns each year from 2015 to 2017.<sup>27</sup> Working-class young people are the main target group. The briefs for the 2018 and 2019 army recruitment campaigns specified the target audience as 16- to 24-year-olds who are “C2DE”, referring to the poorest socioeconomic categories.<sup>28</sup> The brief for 2017 said that the target audience was young people in families with a mean annual income of £10,000.<sup>29</sup> Campaigns have also sought to target those who are “money-driven, but not good at money management”.<sup>30</sup> Poorer towns and cities in Scotland, Wales, the north of England and on the south coast are selected as priority targets for advertising; all experience high levels of poverty (see Fig. 3). A study of army visits to London schools in 2010 found that the poorest schools were most likely to be visited.<sup>31</sup>

**Figure 3:** English towns and cities targeted in the 2019 ‘Your army needs you’ campaign,<sup>32</sup> by their deprivation ranking<sup>33</sup>

English town/city targeted in 2019 ‘Your army needs you’ campaign	Local authority deprivation ranking from 1 (most deprived) to 326 (least deprived)
<b>Primary locations</b>	
Liverpool	4
Manchester	5
Middlesbrough	6
Birmingham	7
Bradford	19
Sunderland	37
Newcastle	53
Sheffield	60
Leeds	70
London	N/A (comprises several local authorities)
<b>Secondary locations</b>	
Blackpool	1
Hull	3
Nottingham	8
Stoke	14
Leicester	21
Southampton	54
Plymouth	69
Bournemouth	117
Scunthorpe (North Lincolnshire)	127



The drive to attract young people who have limited other options is also evident in recruitment messaging. A 2018 investigation found that social media adverts were targeted at teenagers on GCSE results day with messages such as ‘No matter what your results will be, you can still improve yourself in the army.’<sup>34</sup> Recruitment campaigns typically depict military employment as a lifestyle of travel and adventure, sometimes casting this as an escape from a notionally dull life of working-class youth. One advert in the 2019 ‘Your Army Needs You’ campaign, for instance, contrasts scenes of a young woman in a boring job collecting supermarket trolleys with scenes of the same person experiencing a thrilling army career.<sup>35</sup> In fact, surveys of soldiers show a consistently low rate of job satisfaction - at 44 percent in 2019, well below the 69 percent found in a similar survey of civilian workers.<sup>36</sup>

Ministers and recruiters occasionally acknowledge that recruitment is targeted at people from poorer backgrounds. The Ministry of Defence states that:

*In developing such [recruitment advertising] campaigns the Army does recognise and factor in that there are a number of key characteristics including age, academic achievement and socioeconomic profiles that influence the attraction of candidates to the Army.*<sup>37</sup>

Similarly, the Chief Executive of the Army Recruiting Group (Cath Possamai) told MPs in 2019:

*Jonathan Edwards MP: Do you accept any criticism that you are targeting specific socioeconomic groups, deprived geographical areas?*

*Cath Possamai: I do not accept criticism on it. We do target those areas because they are very traditional recruiting grounds for the Army...*<sup>38</sup>

However, the primary aim of military recruitment policy is to meet operational requirements for new soldiers, with any social benefit at best a secondary aim. The targeting of young people from deprived backgrounds must be understood in the context of the army’s struggles to meet recruitment targets in recent years - a purported “recruitment crisis”.<sup>39</sup> For example, a government policy document on the recruitment of 16- and 17-year-olds states:

*The current recruiting environment is would [sic] not generate sufficient recruits to meet Army demand through O18s alone. JE recruitment...presents an opportunity to mitigate Standard Entry shortfall.*<sup>40</sup>

As the following section explains, 16- and 17-year-olds are targeted particularly for roles within the army which adults might find unattractive, especially those involving the highest exposure to health risks and relatively few opportunities to develop transferable skills.

# 4 ● Impact of early enlistment on social mobility

With respect to claims made for the army as a vehicle for social mobility, this chapter makes three points:

- The army's education and training for the 16-17 age group compares poorly with civilian alternatives, falling below the legal standards that apply in civilian life and suffering a very high rate of attrition.
- Stress-related mental health and behaviour problems are substantially more common in the army than in civilian life, with the youngest personnel most affected. There is some evidence that the prevalence of antisocial behaviour increases after enlistment.
- These problems are compounded by the army's policy of seeking 16- and 17-year-olds "particularly for the infantry", which carries substantially greater risks to mental health and socioeconomic outcomes than other armed forces roles.

## What claims are made for the army as a route out of poverty?

The government, the army's leadership, and the media often present the army as a reliable route out of poverty for young people with a background of deprivation, with ministers and generals justifying the UK's low enlistment age by the opportunities that they say it affords young people.<sup>41</sup> A Ministry of Defence policy document on the recruitment of under-18s states that "we take pride in the fact that our Armed Forces provide challenging and constructive education, training and employment opportunities for young people...equipping young people with valuable and transferable skills".<sup>42</sup> In 2015, the then Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Nick Carter, said that, by enlisting from age 16½ [sic], the army was performing "a hugely valuable service to UK society".<sup>43</sup> Lt Col Rich Hall, Commanding Officer of the army's training institution for soldiers aged 16-17½, wrote in 2019: "More than a training regiment, we are an education establishment offering skills for life, culture, ambition, belief and a regain on years of failed schooling and absent/abusive parenting. We are social mobility".<sup>44</sup> Ministers have mobilised similar claims to rebut calls to raise the minimum enlistment age to 18.

For example, as Minister of the Armed Forces, Penny Mordaunt MP, stated: “We have no intention of denying young people [aged under 18] this opportunity [to develop technical and life skills in the armed forces]”<sup>45</sup>

To demonstrate that early enlistment is conducive to social mobility, the Ministry of Defence would need to provide evidence of the long-term educational and employment outcomes of soldiers who enlist under the age of 18, including the many who leave during training. No such evidence has been presented. Instead, handpicked anecdotes showing individuals whose prospects have improved since enlisting obscure the many who fare more poorly.

Indeed, the available evidence shows that enlisting from age 16 is detrimental to youth social mobility. The policy encourages young people to leave full-time education at the earliest opportunity, leads to a high rate of attrition during training, has been found to increase the risk of violent and drug-related offending, and introduces young people to an environment where risks to mental health are high.

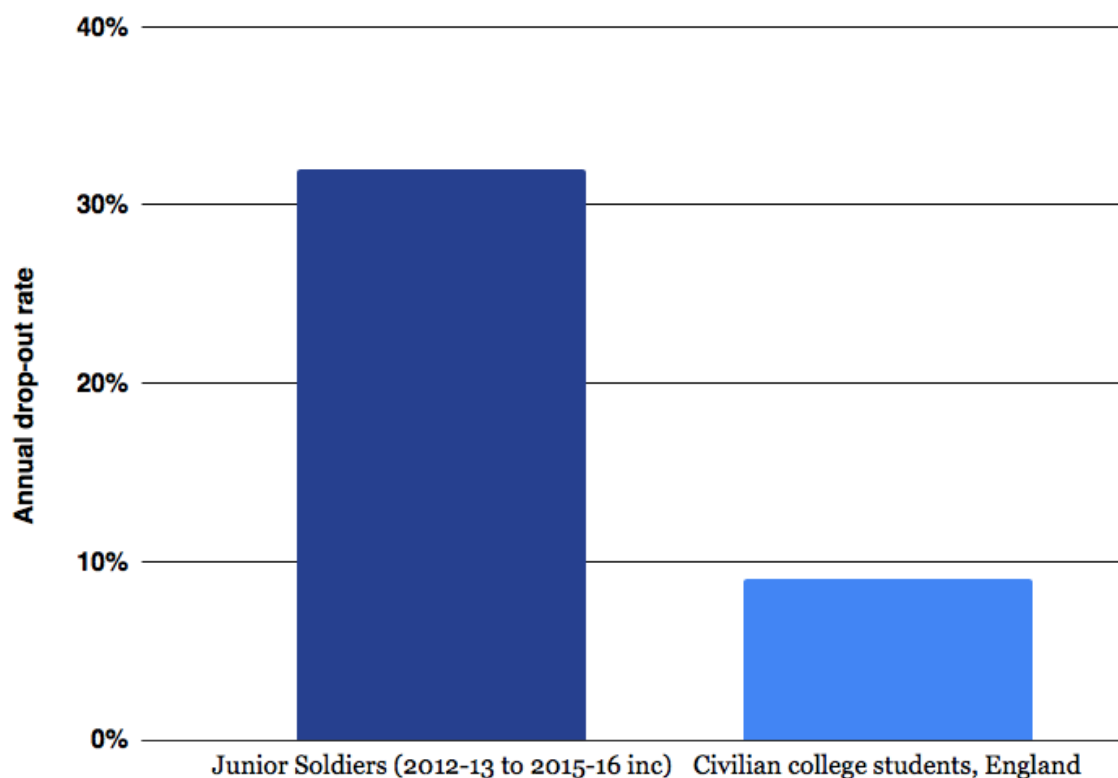
## **How does the army’s education and training compare with the alternatives?**

Eighty percent of the most socio-economically deprived young people in UK society - those eligible for free school meals - now continue in full-time education after the age of 16.<sup>46</sup> Since schools and colleges have been under a legal obligation to enrol students for GCSE resits in English and maths if they do not already hold the qualifications at grade C/4 after age 16,<sup>47</sup> attainment in this age group has increased substantially.<sup>48</sup>

The army’s formal education for its 16- and 17-year-old recruits is rudimentary relative to a civilian college, despite recruitment materials characterising enlistment as an opportunity to continue in education; the training centre for 16-year-olds is called the Army Foundation College (AFC), for example. The AFC does not offer GCSE resits. Recruits are enrolled instead on much shorter, less substantial, Functional Skills courses, which are not well recognised by employers.<sup>49</sup> Whereas a wide range of subjects are available in the civilian education system, the army supplements English and maths with only one; a basic qualification in ICT. The army’s target for recruits’ attainment in literacy and numeracy after up to 12 months of military training is Entry Level 3, which is equivalent to a reading age of 9–11 years.<sup>50</sup> Even this unambitious target may be missed in many cases, since 32 percent of new recruits drop out of training, at which point they are out of education and work.<sup>51</sup> The average attrition rate in full-time education for the same age group is much lower, at nine percent.<sup>52</sup>

**Figure 4:** Comparison of attrition rates of junior soldiers and full-time civilian college students in the same age group.

Sources: MoD, 2017, op cit,; DfE, 2018 op cit.



A minority of young people from age 16 leave full-time education for employment. Under the Education and Skills Act (2008), they may only do so if the work is full-time and, until they turn 18, they complete a minimum of 280 guided learning hours (GLH) per year towards accredited qualifications – approximately one day per week. The army is, however, exempt from this standard;<sup>53</sup> its three courses for “junior” soldiers are rated at less than the 280 GLH that the Act requires of young people in civilian work and some of the courses are optional. The army emphasises that every recruit is enrolled onto an apprenticeship at Level 2. In practice, most recruits at age 16 enlist for combat jobs such as the infantry, for which the apprenticeship in “Public Services” consists of basic soldier training and is not designed for career progression beyond the army.<sup>54</sup>

Ofsted has graded the Army Foundation College as “outstanding” under a specially designed inspection regime that focuses on welfare provision and excludes the standard of education from its scope. In January 2019 the Minister of State for Education confirmed: “Ofsted does not grade the Army Foundation College in Harrogate on the same basis as civilian colleges for the age group”.<sup>55</sup> In fact, a civilian college that operated to the same level as AFC (i.e. which had a 32 percent

attrition rate and did not provide GCSE resits) would have its government funding withdrawn. This detail is missing from the army’s marketing and briefing materials, so recruits and their parents are unlikely to be aware of it.

In summary, the army’s education offer for the 16-18 age group, while marketed as first-class, falls below the minimum legal standards that apply in civilian work, and well below the standards expected in education. The drop-out rate is also three times as high as a civilian college. These shortcomings leave the army’s recruits at a socioeconomic disadvantage, particularly relative to their civilian peers who persevere with full-time education beyond age 16.

**Figure 5:** Comparison of civilian and army education offer for 16- and 17-year-olds

	Army Foundation College (initial training centre for soldiers aged 16-16½)	Civilian college
Full-time education	X	✓
Wide-range of courses	X	✓
GCSE resits with support	X	✓
Sub-GCSE level courses	✓	✓
Options for A Levels or equivalent	X	✓
Ofsted inspects quality of education	X	✓
Ofsted inspects welfare arrangements	✓	✓
Meets Ofsted standards for a college of further education	X	✓
Education and Skills Act minimum standards apply	X	✓
Unrestricted freedom to leave or change college at any time	X	✓

## What is the impact of enlistment on the mental health and socioeconomic outcomes of young people?

The armed forces are a stressful occupation from the first day; the initial training of recruits from age 16 involves “all round degradation”, according to the army.<sup>56</sup> Training is an intentionally coercive process, exposing new recruits to multiple stressors, including harsh discipline, sleep deprivation, physical and mental exhaustion, and isolation from friends and family.<sup>57</sup> Film footage from the Army Foundation College shows instructors pushing trainees to continue when they are exhausted or in pain, and recruits vomiting and fainting.<sup>58</sup>

It may be unsurprising, therefore, that the prevalence of stress-related mental health and behaviour problems – which are detrimental to social mobility – is consistently found to be substantially higher in the armed forces than in civilian life. Irrespective of age at enlistment, military personnel are twice as likely as working civilians to suffer from anxiety and depression, according to a King’s College London study.<sup>59</sup> Since this has been found at times of both high and low deployment activity, it appears to be a feature of military personnel and employment in general, and not (as is often assumed) to be related only to traumatic war experiences.<sup>60</sup> Those most affected are younger personnel in the army from working class backgrounds, and particularly those in the infantry.<sup>61</sup>

Studies have also found that armed forces personnel are between two and three times as likely as civilians to drink at harmful levels, and also more likely than civilians to commit a violent or drug-related offence.<sup>62</sup> Again, younger army personnel, particularly those in the infantry, tend to be most affected.<sup>63</sup> A study by King’s College London in 2013 found that the rate of violent offending among armed forces personnel increased after their enlistment, and increased again after a first deployment, reaching twice the pre-enlistment rate.<sup>64</sup> Drug-related offences showed a similar pattern.

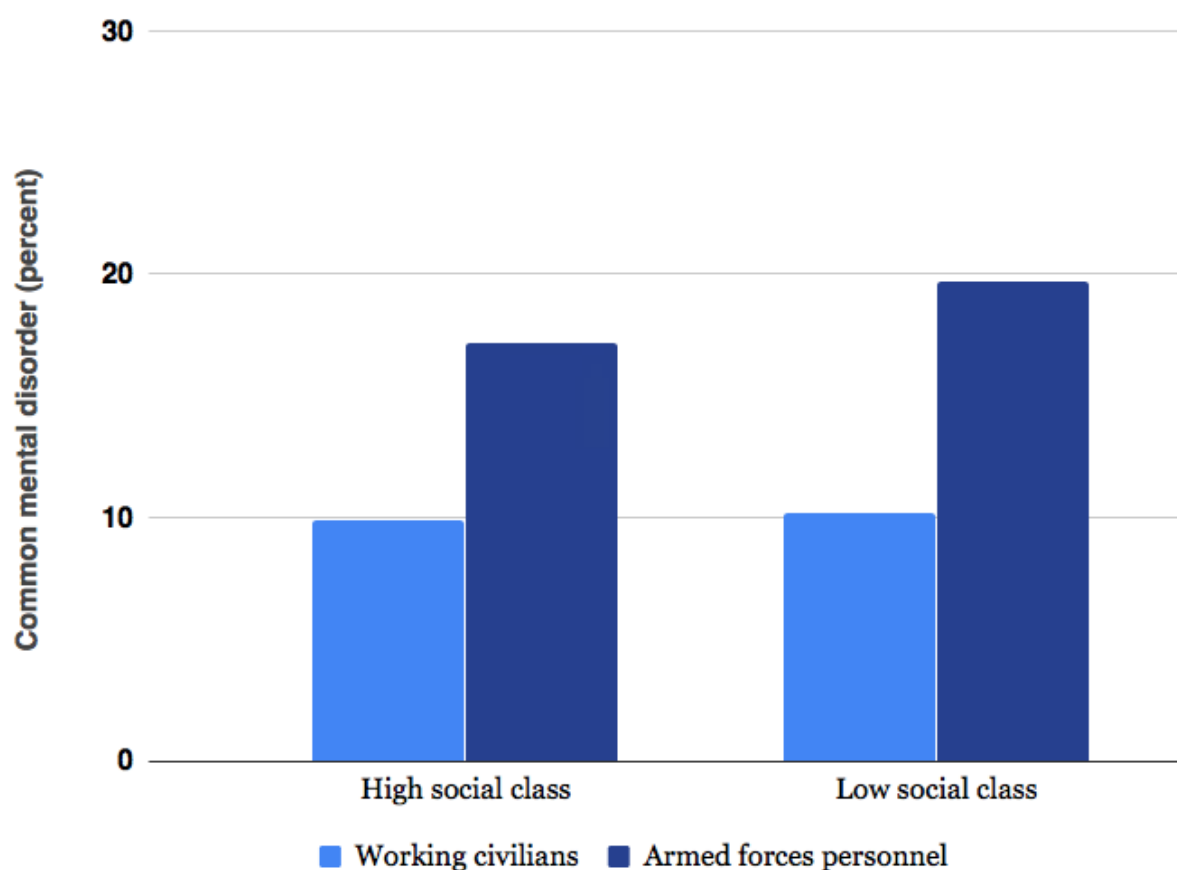
Young people in mid-adolescence, at about age 16 or 17, are more susceptible than adults to mental health problems associated with chronic stress.<sup>65</sup> Relative to older individuals, young people in this group are temperamentally more anxious, react to stressors with greater anxiety and then remain anxious for longer, and are more likely to experience depressed mood and emotional volatility.<sup>66</sup> Under stress, adolescents are more likely than adults to develop anxiety-related mental health problems, such as depression.<sup>67</sup> The mid-adolescent brain is also sensitive to repeated or prolonged stress, which impedes and can impair the maturation process, particularly the development of structures involved in the regulation of emotions; there is some evidence that this can lead to lasting problems with anxiety in adulthood.<sup>68</sup>

Neuroscientific and psychosocial research is now finding that susceptibility to

stress in mid-adolescence may be particularly elevated among those who have already experienced a stressful childhood.<sup>69</sup> Young people who have experienced daily stress as children are more likely than other individuals to react to stressors, such as those found in military training.<sup>70</sup>

**Figure 6:** Prevalence of anxiety and depression in the UK armed forces and working civilian population, by social class

Sources: L Goodwin et al., 2015, op cit. (Table 2)



The mental health of 16- and 17-year olds in the army as a discrete group, relative to civilians of the same age and to adult recruits, has yet to be addressed explicitly in the research literature. However, young age and childhood adversity are now well attested as risk factors among military personnel and veterans for stress-related disorders such as PTSD,<sup>71</sup> anxiety and depression,<sup>72</sup> self-harm,<sup>73</sup> and suicide,<sup>74</sup> and for behavioural problems such as alcohol misuse<sup>75</sup> and violent behaviour.<sup>76</sup> It is also clear that the recruitment of mid-adolescent children from socioeconomically deprived backgrounds draws a group that is particularly vulnerable to stress into conditions where stress is part of daily life, which appears to have a detrimental

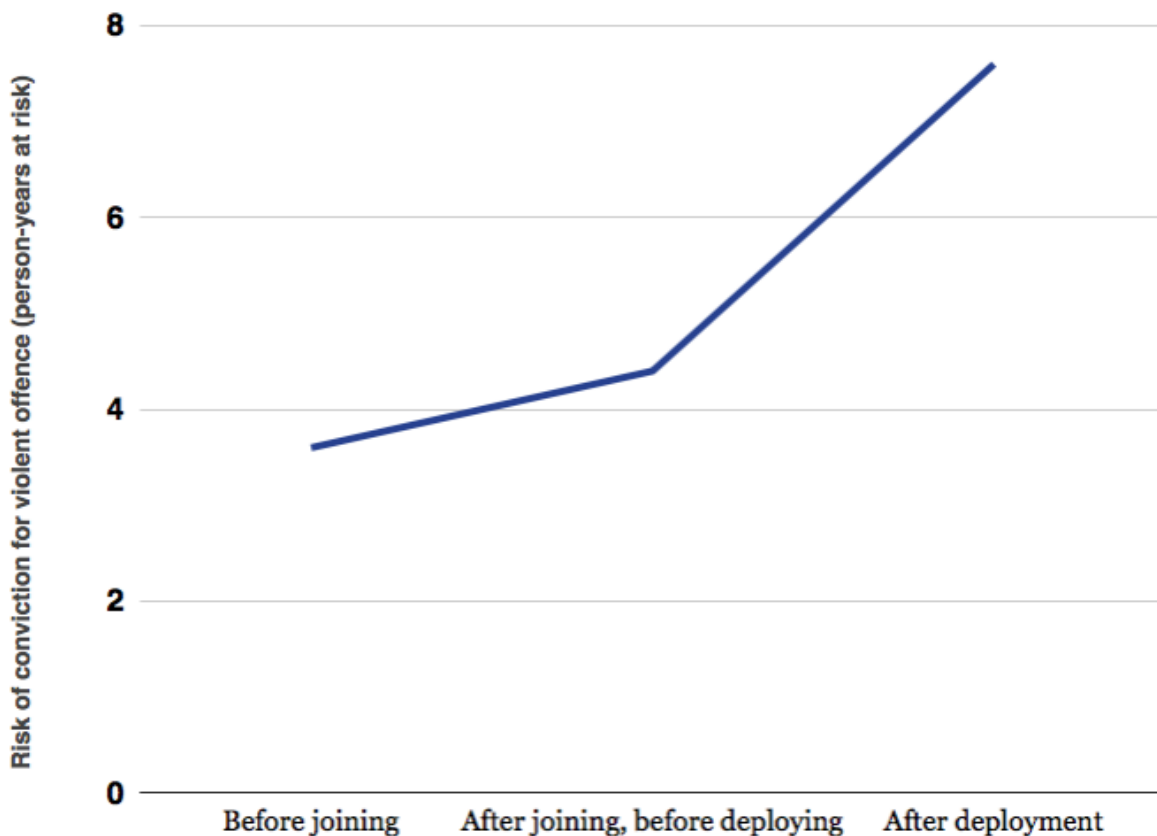
effect on their mental health and behaviour. The cited studies show that, in general, younger soldiers are more likely than both civilians of the same age and older soldiers to suffer from stress-related mental health and behaviour problems:

*Again, we have seen that it is precisely child recruits from disadvantaged backgrounds who are at highest risk of adverse outcomes in the military.<sup>77</sup>*

On this evidence, the policy of recruiting minors from age 16 subjects them to substantial risks which, while significant in their own right, also have a detrimental impact on the long-term social mobility of socioeconomically deprived young people.

**Figure 7:** Violent offending in UK armed forces, risk by time period

Source: D Macmanus et al., op cit., 2013





## For which army jobs are the youngest recruits most sought?

The problems outlined above are amplified by the army's policy of seeking 16- and 17-year-olds for military roles that carry the greatest risks. Recruits aged under 18 can only enlist into the ranks; they cannot join as commissioned officers.<sup>78</sup> The army states that the reason it recruits from age 16 is to compensate for the under-recruitment of adults, "particularly for the infantry", which is the main close-combat component of the army's force.<sup>79</sup> Approximately 34 percent of the armed forces' enlisted minors join infantry regiments, versus 21 percent of enlisted adults.<sup>80</sup>

Unlike technical military jobs that require GCSEs or A Levels, or which can only be joined from age 18, the infantry does not require a new recruit to hold any qualifications.<sup>81</sup> Infantry recruits are also more likely than other personnel to have had a troubled childhood.<sup>82</sup>

The infantry is associated with several factors detrimental to long-term social mobility:

- Infantry training is little more than an extended version of the basic course given to all new soldiers and, according to veterans' testimony,<sup>83</sup> is more brutalising than training for other roles.<sup>84</sup>
- The army's education for junior soldiers in the infantry is rudimentary and, unlike that for some roles in the army's various technical corps, is not readily transferable to civilian work.
- Attrition during infantry training is very high – approximately 35 percent (across all ages) and twice the rate in the rest of the army.<sup>85</sup>
- Infanteers suffer the army's highest rate of injury in war. In the Afghanistan War, fatality and physical injury in the British infantry were six times more common than in the rest of the army,<sup>86</sup> and infanteers in the Iraq/Afghanistan era have been twice as likely as other armed forces personnel to screen positive for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).<sup>87</sup>
- During the Afghanistan War, 26 percent of infantry personnel were drinking at levels deemed to be harmful, according to a King's College London study.<sup>88</sup>

As a result of their young age and, often, troubled childhood, minors enlisted for the infantry from age 16 carry multiple risk factors for stress-related mental health risks and are relatively unlikely to be provided with a transferable education for later employment. This will come to matter later, since minors who join the infantry typically leave the army after an average of 10 years, when they are in their mid-20s.<sup>89</sup> Little is known about the employment destinations of infantry veterans, but a study in 2013 found that 30 percent who had left the army within four years of

joining (irrespective of age at enlistment) were still not in work or education 18 months afterwards.<sup>90</sup>

In summary, there is no evidence to support the common assumption that the army offers a route out of poverty, and much to show that joining up at a young age is detrimental to the socioeconomic outcomes of young people. It also carries multiple risks to mental health, and there is some evidence that behavioural problems, such as violence and heavy drinking, become more prevalent after enlistment.

# 5. Better prospects for young people

Finally, this section makes three points:

- In view of the socioeconomic risks that follow military enlistment, including a high drop-out rate during training and mental health impacts, full-time civilian education is a better prospect for 16- and 17-year olds from deprived backgrounds.
- Raising the military enlistment age to 18 would safeguard younger people from the risks of military employment and encourage more to remain in full-time education, without detriment to those who wish to pursue a military career from age 18.
- As a matter of principle and good social policy, no young person should find that military enlistment is their only viable option for education or work.

## What options exist for young people outside the armed forces?

It is sometimes suggested that, if the army did not enlist young people from deprived backgrounds, they would be left unemployed and on the streets. In fact, as the previous chapter showed, the large majority of young people - including the most socioeconomically deprived - now continue in full-time education until age 18. Those who leave education for employment may now only do so for work that is full-time, and only provided that they complete a minimum amount of education towards accredited qualifications each year. Therefore, if the minimum enlistment age were raised to 18, most young people who might have enlisted at 16 would normally continue with their education. The remaining minority would be in full-time work for civilian employers which, unlike the army, are required to ensure that their young workers meet minimum standards of continuing education until they turn 18. Participation in education until 18 would give such young people the opportunity to increase their attainment in subjects and qualifications valuable in the employment market, alongside many other benefits of education. This would not only provide them greater opportunities in the civilian employment market, but would also increase the range and rank of armed forces roles which they could subsequently pursue.

Some young people in the age group may not have good educational or employment options available to them; such as those who have been excluded from mainstream education. However, the argument that military enlistment at 16 is a useful “last resort” for some young people is not a sound justification of the recruitment policy.<sup>91</sup> Given the extraordinary risks that military employment entails, and States’ responsibilities to ensure that a recruit’s decision to enlist is “genuinely voluntary”, joining the armed forces should never be the only option available to a child. Wherever military enlistment may be the only choice available, this should prompt greater investment in ending child poverty and providing economically viable civilian opportunities, free from the risks, obligations and difficulties of the armed forces.

Several bodies representing the rights of children agree that their interests are best served outside the military. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed concern at the UK’s recruitment policy in 2008 and 2016, and recommended that the government “raise the minimum age for recruitment into the armed forces to 18 years in order to promote the protection of children through an overall higher legal standard”.<sup>92</sup> The House of Commons and House of Lords Joint Committee on Human Rights has endorsed this recommendation.<sup>93</sup> The children’s commissioners for the four jurisdictions of the UK, along with children’s rights organisations, support the calls for an end to the military enlistment of children under the age of 18.<sup>94</sup>

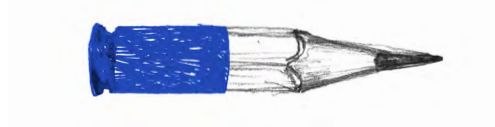
# 6. Conclusion and recommendations

Contrary to the many claims made for the social mobility impact of joining the army, enlistment is more likely to be damaging to young people's prospects. By encouraging young people to leave full-time education prematurely - for education of a lower standard - and by exposing them to a range of risks to their physical and mental health, military employment is largely detrimental to their social mobility.

Therefore, the government should cease justifying the recruitment policy with claims for the benefits it gives to the youngest enlistees, at least unless comprehensive evidence can be provided that supports such claims. The government should also respond to the concerns outlined in this report. In particular, the Ministry of Defence should commission independent research into the socioeconomic and health outcomes of soldiers enlisted as minors as a discrete group (including the one in three who leave during training).

The deliberate targeting and disproportionate recruitment of socioeconomically deprived young people is a source of particular concern. Far from providing these teenagers with reliable opportunities to develop and enhance their social mobility, enlistment introduces new risks and is more likely to subject them to harm. Since younger soldiers with a background of adversity are the most vulnerable to such harm, and are channelled into roles where they are most exposed to risk, this group are bearing the greatest burden of military service.

To promote social mobility and better life chances for children - including those who have experienced deprivation - the UK should stop recruiting them into the armed forces, and instead invest in ensuring that all young people have access to meaningful educational and economic opportunities in civilian life.



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86 For sources and detail, see D Gee, *The last ambush? Aspects of mental health in the British armed forces*, 2013, p. 58, [https://www.forceswatch.net/sites/default/files/The\\_Last\\_Ambush\\_web.pdf](https://www.forceswatch.net/sites/default/files/The_Last_Ambush_web.pdf).

87 Sundin et al., 2010, op cit.; Fear et al., 2010, op cit.

88 Sundin et al., 2010, op cit.

89 As of 2014, the average army career lengths for soldiers aged a) under 18 and b) over 18 at enlistment in non-technical combat roles were as follows: infantry <18 = 11 years, 0 months; 18+ = 9 years, 4 months (difference = 1 year, 8 months); armoured corps <18 = 11 years, 4 months; 18+ = 9 years, 4 months (difference = 2 years, 0 months); artillery <18 = 13 years, 0 months; 18+ = 9 years, 6 months (difference 3 years, 6 months). Across the three role groups, the career length of soldiers enlisted under the age of 18 ranges from 18 percent longer than adult recruits in the infantry (the most common role) to 37 percent longer in the artillery. Hansard: HC Deb, 25 June 2014, c223W.

90 M Fossey and J Hacker Hughes, *Future Horizons Programme: Final report*, 2013, <http://www.fim-trust.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/20131107-FHP-Final-Report-Nov-2013.pdf>.

91 For example, the Defence Committee has recognised that “Some young men and women may join the Services as a last resort” but concluded “that does not necessarily mean that they have made a wrong choice...There is no reason why those who join the Services, as ‘a last resort’ should not find it a satisfying and rewarding career”. House of Commons Defence Committee, 2005, op cit., para. 42.

92 UN CRC, 2016, op cit., p. 24; 2008, op cit., p. 3.

93 House of Commons and House of Lords Joint Committee on Human Rights, *Children’s Rights: Twenty-fifth Report of Session 2008-09*, 2009, p. 47-48.

94 Child Soldiers International, 'Open letter to the Ministry of Defence', 2016, op cit. The Children's Commissioner for England, Anne Longfield, communicated her own support for the same position by email to Child Soldiers International.

