

# Should We End Military Recruiting in High Schools as a Matter of Child Protection and Public Health?

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Recruiters for the various US armed forces have free access to our nation's high schools, as mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act. Military recruiter behaviors are disturbingly similar to predatory grooming.

Adults in the active military service are reported to experience increased mental health risks, including stress, substance abuse, and suicide, and the youngest soldiers consistently show the worst health effects, suggesting military service is associated with disproportionately poor health for this population.

We describe the actions of a high school parent teacher student association in Seattle, Washington, which sought to limit the aggressive recruitment of children younger than 18 years into the military. (*Am J Public Health*. 2011;101:19–23. doi: 10.2105/AJPH.2009.183418)

**SINCE ITS ADOPTION IN 1989**, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child has been ratified more quickly and by more governments than any other human rights instrument.<sup>1</sup> There are only two United Nations (UN) members who have yet to ratify the convention: Somalia and the United States. Opponents of ratification object to giving away US sovereignty to the UN (a general objection applying to most treaties), but they also claim the treaty undermines parental rights.<sup>2</sup>

But those are not the only objections. An optional protocol to the convention promises, “Persons who have not attained the age of 18 years are not compulsorily recruited into their armed forces”<sup>1</sup> and ensures safeguards for children subjected to voluntary recruitment. The United States would be out of compliance with this protocol because our federal government currently mandates that military recruiters have full access to the nation's public high schools for purposes of aggressively recruiting youngsters. (The laws governing military recruiters in high schools are Section 544 of the National Defense Authorization Act [FY 2002; PL No. 107–107] and Section 9528 of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 [PL No. 107–110].)

In every public high school across the country, including the one our children attend in central Seattle, recruiters from all branches of the military work to enlist children, aged 14 through 18 years, for assignments ranging from pushing paper to bombing Afghan villages.

Underage adolescents often enlist in what is called the “Future Soldier Program,” which encourages them to attend boot camp during the summer between their junior and senior years.

## PUBLIC HEALTH ISSUES FOR YOUNG RECRUITS

There are public health reasons for concern regarding military recruitment in public schools. The bulk of newly enlisted military personnel are developmentally in late adolescence—a time of relatively robust physical health but not necessarily complete brain development or a wise time to introduce high levels of stress. One pediatric researcher has noted,

Joining the military service . . . entails absolute obedience, uniform appearance, disengagement from the family, and a potential threat for physical injury and mental stress, as well as requirement for responsibility beyond the personal needs of the individual.<sup>3</sup>

Although adults in the active military service are reported to experience increased mental health risk, including stress, substance abuse, and suicide,<sup>4,5</sup> the youngest soldiers consistently show the worst health effects, suggesting military service is associated with disproportionately poor health for this population.<sup>6</sup> A study of mental disorders in the US military found the highest rates of all disorders, including alcohol abuse, anxiety syndromes, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder, among the youngest cohort, those aged 17 through 24 years.<sup>7</sup> Another study found that younger soldiers had

30% to 60% more substance abuse disorders than did older soldiers, and younger women in particular had the highest incidence of attempted suicide or self-inflicted injuries.<sup>8</sup> The youngest group of veterans also recently experienced a 26% increase in suicides from 2005 to 2007.<sup>9</sup> A review of hospitalizations among military personnel in the 1990s showed the highest rates among the youngest recruits.<sup>10</sup> We also know that the youngest active duty military personnel engage in the riskiest sexual behaviors and that almost one third of first births to active duty females are to women younger than 21 years.<sup>6</sup>

Much has been written lately about adolescent brain development to explain why adolescents make decisions differently than do adults. One recent review in *Nature* explains,

Even before you add raging hormones and peer-group-driven rebelliousness-without-a-cause to the mixture, adolescents may simply be unable consistently to make decisions the same way adults do. This could well be one of the reasons that, although most people are healthier during their adolescence than at any other time in their lives, adolescents are three or four times more likely to die than children past infancy: they take risks, have accidents and pay the prices.<sup>11</sup> (p865)

Auto insurance companies certainly understand this concept and age-adjust their rates accordingly.

## ENTER THE PARENT-TEACHER ASSOCIATION

Four years ago, the official, nationally affiliated parent organization at the Seattle, Washington,

Garfield High School (the Parent-Teacher Student Association, or as it is known at the state and national level, PTA) took a stand opposing school-based military recruiting.<sup>12</sup> In taking that stand, we exposed ourselves to international media attention and scrutiny, generated contention within the state and national PTA organizations, and, we believe, created changes in attitudes toward school-based military recruiting in ways that may protect young people from predatory recruiting.

Garfield High School enrolls 1700 students, of whom 42% are White, 27% Black (including direct African immigrants), and 24% Asian.<sup>13</sup> During the first years of school integration efforts in Seattle, Garfield was a math and science magnet school that attempted to attract north-end White students to a predominantly African American community. The school community now boasts of its broad diversity, both racially and economically. Its musical prowess is legend, with a jazz band that four times has won the Essentially Ellington National Jazz Band Competition at Lincoln Center. It counts among its alumni such musical figures as Ernestine Anderson, Jimi Hendrix, and Quincy Jones.<sup>14</sup> Martin Luther King chose to speak at Garfield when he made his only visit to Seattle in 1961,<sup>15</sup> and Barack Obama spoke at Garfield in 2006. The swimming pool is named after Medgar Evers. It's a school with a history and a lot of soul.

Garfield's PTA is a school booster organization in many traditional ways. We have a large working board of directors (about 45 members) that raises significant funds (approximately \$300 000) through an annual direct appeal and a spring auction. We spend

tens of thousands of dollars annually to support a reading literacy program for the many students who arrive from middle school functionally illiterate. We support a college access program employing several AmeriCorps members to help first-generation immigrant students apply to colleges. We buy sports uniforms. We host teacher appreciation breakfasts. We are represented on the school's governing council with faculty and administration. We organize meetings with the community to discuss gang violence and student safety. We pay for field trips, lab fees, and art supplies and give small grants to faculty to purchase projectors and books. One year, during budget cuts, we even supported an entire math faculty position.

While engaging in these traditional parent organization activities, we do not shy away from controversy. Our PTA passed a resolution

in fall 2002 opposing the anticipated US invasion of Iraq:

The lives of the young people we graduate from this institution are valuable and precious to us. The financial costs of fighting a new war will come directly from the public's resources that would be better spent improving the quality of education for our children, and advancing their opportunities for higher education.<sup>16</sup>

The United States invaded Iraq in March 2003. Sustaining a war with an all-volunteer army is difficult, and military recruiters fell behind. If you're a military recruiter, where do you go to find prospects? Where do you find the most likely to enlist young people—those who may have limited incomes and are worried about affording college? In Seattle, recruiters head to the cafeterias at the lower-income central and south-end high schools (where young people on

free and reduced lunch go to get a meal).

Our PTA noticed the aggressive recruitment and objected, as its mission is "to advocate and act for the health, education and general well-being of students at Garfield High School and beyond."<sup>17</sup>

The PTA held a forum on military recruitment, during which speakers reviewed the military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, which prohibits openly gay and lesbian people from being in military service. We also talked about increasingly deceptive and aggressive recruiting practices and discussed an Associated Press report of hundreds of rapes of young women by their military recruiters.<sup>18</sup> The PTA board subsequently recommended a resolution opposing military recruitment in public schools, and the general membership took a favorable vote on that motion May 9, 2005.



Note. Photo by K. Barker.

**FIGURE 1—Students at Garfield High School in Seattle, WA, drop to the floor for pushups under the command of a military recruiter at the school in 2009.**

## THE PRESS RESPONSE

A reporter from the *Christian Science Monitor* attended our meeting on May 9 and wrote an account of the vote.<sup>19</sup> Within the week, the story received over 75 000 hits on the paper's Web site, well above the usual 10 000 hit rate for a lead story. From there, the story spread.

The next recruitment date at Garfield was May 18, the same day as our faculty appreciation lunch. The PTA co-chair (author A. H.) delivered notice to the military recruiters that, although they had a legal right to be at Garfield, they were no longer welcome. Two local television stations heard about the recruitment appearance and hurried over to set up cameras in the lunchroom. *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* reporter Mary Lynn Lyke published a front-page story with a photo above the fold.<sup>20</sup>

Local talk radio was abuzz. For the next several days, PTA members appeared on two dozen local, national, and international radio and television talk and news shows and were interviewed for several newspapers, including news services that were picked up by local outlets all over the country. Next came the *New York Times*, the *London Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, German public television, National Public Radio, Canadian radio, a Swiss daily paper, the Japanese press, and another round of local stations.

The press attention was overwhelming partly because the PTA is a mainstream organization whose only mission is to protect and support children; when the PTA takes a stand on an issue like this, the issue itself becomes newsworthy. Our efforts also gave a boost to antiwar groups, whose

efforts to raise public opposition after the US invasion had to that date been lackluster.

Some pundits attached the lack of public opposition to the war to the absence of a military draft but noted that the aggressive military recruitment among vulnerable student populations was, in effect, a backdoor draft.<sup>21</sup> Young recruits in general tend to be from lower income households and have fewer prospects than do their fellow high school students,<sup>22</sup> a demographic profile that further exacerbates the health effects of military exposure.

## POLICY ISSUES AT CITY, STATE, AND FEDERAL LEVELS

The Seattle school board took up the issue over the summer of 2005, and members of the board worked with us and with veteran and student activist groups to revise citywide rules on recruitment. There were two rounds of changes, during which several policies were modified. Recruiter visits were limited to one per semester, visits were to be announced in advance, and military recruiters were no longer free to roam through the school building. Counterrecruiters were to be invited when the military was on-site to provide information on the enlistment contract, the realities of military life, and alternatives to the military for funding college.

Although these new policies represented some of the most restrictive recruitment policies on record in the United States, their effect was limited to the Seattle public school district. We took the project to the state PTA, hoping to raise statewide interest. Recruitment practices are far more

aggressive in rural and low-income suburban areas than they are in liberal Seattle. We had two unsuccessful attempts to persuade the state PTA to engage on this issue. Finally, on October 6 at the 2007 Washington State PTA Legislative Assembly, the body voted (153 to 78) to amend its platform to limit military access to high school students by encouraging the state office of superintendent of public instruction to help schools conduct better parent education on how the military may contact children.

## HOW TO RECRUIT CHILDREN INTO THE MILITARY

The US Army's School Recruitment Program (SRP) handbook offers wide-ranging advice to its personnel seeking to enlist high school students. It declares, "Recruiters—like infantrymen—must move, shoot, and communicate."<sup>23</sup> Another recruiter handbook states it more clearly: "The objective of the SRP is to assist recruiters with programs and services so they can effectively penetrate the school market."<sup>24</sup> Advice includes various ways for recruiters to insinuate themselves into the school community to gain access to children:

Be so helpful and so much a part of the school scene that you are in constant demand. Attend athletic events at the HS [high school]. Deliver donuts and coffee for the faculty once a month. Offer to be a timekeeper at football games. [And, in a particularly cynical gesture, given Martin Luther King's views on war and militarism] Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday is in January. Wear your dress blues and participate in school events commemorating this holiday.<sup>(p2,5-6)</sup>

The behaviors are remarkably similar to those psychologists

characterize as predatory grooming, defined as

... the process by which a child is befriended by a would-be abuser in an attempt to gain the child's confidence and trust, enabling them to get the child to acquiesce to abusive activity. It is frequently a prerequisite for an abuser to gain access to a child.<sup>25(p288)</sup>

Another definition of predatory grooming notes the importance of being "exceptionally charming and/or helpful" while "failing to honor clear boundaries."<sup>26</sup>

In Seattle, recruiters chaperone dances, tutor kids, coach football teams, and ride buses to and from school—all in an effort to get near kids. In other parts of the state, they volunteer to teach gym classes, sponsor climbing walls, bring large armored vehicles to campuses to create a sensation, and infuse counseling offices with the ASVAB—the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery test—to assist young people in making career choices (with scores forwarded to recruiters). Nothing in the manual advises recruiters to reveal the risks their prospects face—neither the physical hazards on the battlefield nor the psychological trauma and its aftereffects.

These grooming behaviors (called "prospecting" in the handbook) are only varyingly successful. During the height of the Iraq War, recruitment goals were modestly low; even so, the goals were not met for many months. The recent collapse of the US economy, however, has been just the boon the recruiters needed.<sup>27</sup>

## STUDENT PRIVACY PROTECTIONS

The Bush Administration's No Child Left Behind Act, Section 9528, requires public schools to

give military recruiters access to students at school and access to students' contact information. It does allow students and their families to opt out of this wholesale release of private information to the military. The privacy of underage students is also ensured under the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act.

Despite these privacy protections, the army's manual instructs high school recruiters to intentionally circumvent the law:

Lead generation is what makes prospecting possible. Asking a school official for a student directory is one example of lead generation. Be creative if the school doesn't release a list. Consider, for example, contacting the company that produces senior photos. If necessary, have your Future Soldiers review your school's yearbook(s). Have them identify their friends and acquaintances with a phone number, an e-mail address, or any other information they can provide. Use the phone book to identify phone numbers. Think! This kind of information gathering can establish contact with an otherwise hard to find lead. Establishing strong relationships with COIs [centers of influence]—such as yearbook photographers, school officials, and Future Soldiers—ensures you have a constant, reliable source of leads.<sup>23(p2-4)</sup>

Many school districts do not inform families of their privacy rights, subjecting some students to aggressive military recruiting at home as well as at school. Our Garfield PTA works with a group of Seattle-based peace groups to alert families to the opt-out opportunity, primarily through tabling at open house events each fall.

## SHOULD THE PTA AND OTHER AGENCIES LIMIT MILITARY RECRUITMENT?

The army's own recruitment manual mentions the importance of the PTA to the military in recruiting in schools:

You'll not succeed in the schools network if you've ignored the influencers in this segment. Teachers, principals, counselors, and even parent-teacher organization members hold great sway in this market.<sup>23(p3-6)</sup>

Our PTA vote was taken to demonstrate our principled stand on an issue that directly affects our students. PTAs everywhere often show leadership on issues they don't have full control over, including district budgets, student assignment plans, and curriculum. That this issue was and is controversial should not preclude its consideration by PTAs and other organizations.

For example, California's Humboldt County voted to prohibit the military recruitment of children younger than 18 years in the cities of Eureka and Arcata on November 4, 2004, with the support of 56% and 73%, respectively, of the voters for a youth protection act.<sup>28</sup> A federal judge subsequently struck down the measure,<sup>29</sup> a decision both cities appealed.

Public health programs worldwide rely on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to ensure the protection of children in harm's way. We suggest public health advocates in the United States monitor and, where necessary, rein in the behaviors of military recruiters in our schools as a matter of protecting child health and welfare and as a step toward bringing the United States into the family of nations that has ratified the treaty on the Rights of the Child. As a first step, the No Child Left Behind Act should remove the mandate that public high schools admit military recruiters. ■

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### Contributors

A. Hagopian wrote the first draft of this commentary, and K. Barker contributed substantial edits. Both authors were participant observers and conducted literature research for the background section of the commentary.

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