

SOLDIERS

AT 16:



**SIFTING
FACT**

**— FROM
FICTION**



CHILD SOLDIERS
INTERNATIONAL



SOLDIERS AT 16: SIFTING FACT FROM FICTION

‘The fact that the British armed forces continue to recruit from the age of 16 sets a poor example internationally and impedes global efforts to end the use of child soldiers. The Army surely does not need to make youngsters sign up formally at such a young age – there have to be other, better ways to meet our requirements whilst respecting our human rights obligations.’⁴

**Major General (retd)
Tim Cross CBE**

Fewer than 20 countries worldwide still allow their armed forces to recruit young people from age 16. The UK is among them; it is the only major military power and the only European state to recruit from such a young age.¹

Across British society – from children’s organisations to veterans to parliamentary committees – this policy is now being challenged. Most of the public agree that change is due – only one in seven thinks that 16 is an acceptable age to train as a soldier.²

Despite this widespread unease, a number of common misconceptions still lead many 16 and 17 year olds to leave their education early and enlist. Here, we examine these ‘myths’ in light of the evidence available.³

1.

‘Doesn’t the army give young people great education and training?’

The army is exempt from the law that requires all young people aged 16 and 17 to participate in a minimum amount of education each year.⁵ This means that the army’s standards of education participation are lower than those that apply to young civilians.

‘I was recently on the Permanent Staff at the Army Foundation College in Harrogate for two years and I would say that it is a college only in name. It is a military training establishment that turns young people into soldiers – that’s the top and bottom of it – with just a bit of extra education. It is nothing at all like Welbeck Defence Sixth Form College, which really is a college. Many Junior Soldiers at Harrogate come from backgrounds and environments that make them vulnerable to all sorts of problems, and they often get injured because they are driven too hard.’

**Former staff member,
Army Foundation
College (Harrogate)**

Employers regard good GCSE passes as a gold standard of basic education – the Department for Education says that these qualifications are ‘critical’ for all young people, whatever their background.⁶

The army’s youngest recruits are sent to the Army Foundation College in Harrogate. It is an army training camp, not a college. GCSEs are not offered. Instead, recruits are enrolled in low-grade, poorly recognised courses in just three subjects: English, maths and ICT.⁷ Most recruits are also enrolled onto an apprenticeship in ‘Public Services’. Despite its name, the apprenticeship consists of basic infantry training and is not designed for use outside the army.⁸

Soldiers in technical arms, such as the Engineers, might learn a trade. However, most of the army’s youngest recruits – the 16 year olds – join combat roles, especially the infantry,⁹ where the training has little value beyond the army.

2.

‘But isn’t the army good for people who are not cut out for school?’

The evidence points the other way. More than a third of those who join the army aged 16 or 17 drop out during training, leaving them vulnerable to social exclusion.¹⁰ At the same time, increasing numbers of young people who under-achieve at school now stay in education post-16 to improve their grades for a better prospect of a lifetime in employment.¹¹

‘Whilst young people can gain from a military career, recruiting school-leavers diverts them from the broader and superior educational and training opportunities of the civilian system.’

Alex Cunningham MP (Lab)¹⁸

The number of young people who under-achieve at GCSE but get good grades after re-sits is rising.¹² Opportunities to learn a civilian trade are also increasing – more than 64,000 young people aged under 18 joined civilian apprenticeship schemes in 2013/14, for example.¹³ With more young people now staying on in education, the number not in education, employment or training (NEET) is falling.¹⁴

On the other hand, joining the army at 16 is a poor safeguard against becoming NEET. **Two out of every five** soldiers who join the infantry before reaching 18 will have dropped out of the army within their first four years.¹⁵ Having left education early and then gained only the most basic qualifications in the army, these young people are particularly vulnerable to long-term unemployment and other problems.¹⁶

Those who stay in the army for longer can fare well, but most leave eventually and the unemployment rate among young ex-soldiers is not encouraging. Research by the British Legion found that young ex-soldiers are **more likely** than their civilian counterparts to be unemployed or, if employed, **less likely** to find their previous job experience useful.¹⁷

3.

‘Doesn’t the army turn young people away from crime and violence?’

Convictions for non-violent offences are less common among soldiers than among civilians, but the opposite is true of violent offences.

‘I feel that the enlistment age for the military needs to be raised to 18. At the age of 16, our young people are still... choosing the appropriate pathways to enable them to be consciously, politically and socially fully involved in an adult world.’

Chris Gabbett,
Principal, Trinity
Catholic School,
Leamington Spa.²³

A large study of British veterans found that they were **twice as likely** to commit a violent crime on return from Iraq or Afghanistan than before they enlisted.¹⁹

Why might this be? Research has shown repeatedly that exposure to frontline warfare increases the risk of violent acts afterwards, especially when veterans have a history of adversity during childhood.²⁰ **30 per cent** of British military personnel with a pre-enlistment tendency to anti-social behaviour said they had behaved violently on returning from Iraq, according to one study.²¹

Researchers have also found that even soldiers who are not sent to war are more likely to commit violent offences after they enlist than before.²²

It is important to recognise that most soldiers are not habitually violent, but this evidence shows that enlisting in the army tends to increase the risk of violent behaviour, not reduce it.

4.

‘Can’t the army save young people from neglect or abuse at home?’

Young people who have been traumatised in childhood have a right to state protection and support, but enlisting them into the army is not the way to provide it – a military environment can make matters worse.

‘Recruitment of under-18s to the armed forces is, *per se*, an activity which ultimately jeopardises the mental and physical integrity of anyone below the age of 18.’

Amnesty International²⁷

‘We want every young person in the UK to have opportunities after education that aren’t limited to the military. We believe that if any young person has no other option, they have been failed.’

The Woodcraft Folk²⁸

A review of British mental health research has shown that young people from troubled backgrounds are more likely than others to enlist before they turn 18, more likely to join the infantry where exposure to the trauma of warfare is greatest, and more likely to struggle when they leave the forces.²⁴

They are also more likely than other soldiers to misuse alcohol, behave violently, self-harm, and experience mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder.²⁵ This is partly due to their pre-enlistment background, but army service carries risks of its own, even before any exposure to warfare. For example, heavy drinking is **twice** as common in the forces as it is in the general population, with younger recruits drinking much more heavily than civilians of the same age.²⁶

5.

‘Soldiers aren’t sent to war until they’re 18, so what’s the risk?’

A recruit’s age at enlistment bears heavily on the risk of fatality or serious injury across their full army career. British soldiers who enlisted at age 16 and completed training were twice as likely to die or be injured in Afghanistan as those who enlisted aged 18 or above.²⁹

‘I don’t think any 16 year old should be in the military, even though I enjoyed the training. At that age you just can’t make an informed choice. There is nothing you can get in the army that you can’t get elsewhere, as a civilian, and with more freedom.’

John, Afghanistan War veteran.³⁵

Recruiters’ instructions say that the very youngest recruits (aged 16-16½) may only be offered jobs in frontline combat roles.³⁰ The Ministry of Defence has even said that it wants 16 and 17 year olds **‘particularly for the infantry’**.³¹ And, unlike some other army jobs, the infantry is open to 16 year old school-leavers who have no qualifications.

As a consequence, 16 and 17 year olds are over-represented in the infantry’s intake,³² yet it is the most dangerous part of the army. In fact, the fatality rate among British infantrymen in Afghanistan was **seven times** that in the rest of the armed forces.³³ So, the youngest recruits are more likely than adult recruits to be enlisted into frontline combat roles, which carry the highest risks once soldiers turn 18 and can be sent to war.

The army has also said that recruits aged under 18 are **twice** as likely as adult recruits to be injured during training, because their bodies are physically immature.³⁴

6.

‘But parents have to give consent first – isn’t that a safeguard?’

A recruiter is supposed to gain the informed consent of parents before their child can enlist. In practice, consent is treated as a formality and amounts to a poor safeguard.

‘I would fully support any campaign that stopped the recruitment of 16 year olds into the armed forces, on the grounds that they are still children and unable to make realistic decisions about their futures... At schools career events and army recruitment offices there seems to be a false hope, a glorification of army life that is at odds with the training and education of young recruits.’

Parent of discharged 16 year old army recruit³⁹

The army’s guide for parents is just a glossy marketing brochure – its 32 pages omit to mention the risks and legal obligations that follow enlistment.³⁶ Nor does the guide explain to parents that their child will be locked in to army service for four years from the day that he or she turns 18. (This is stated in the Enlistment Paper, which is not publicly available and not given to recruits until the point of enlistment.)

Recruiters are not required to meet with parents at all. They only need a parent’s signature on a form, sent by post, as proof of consent to enlistment.³⁷ Once their child is enlisted, parents **lose the right to withdraw consent**, despite remaining legally responsible for their child’s wellbeing.³⁸

In particular, the arrangements for seeking consent offer no safeguard in the case of parents who neglect their children’s welfare.

7.

‘Can’t recruits just leave if they don’t like it?’

Young soldiers have a right to leave the army until the age of 18, but subject to complicated and legally binding restrictions, which a civilian employer could not lawfully impose. Soldiers can no longer ‘buy themselves out’.

‘The time is right to look at under-18 recruitment again. It should not be limited to just the financial costs of training and recruitment, but must seriously examine the personal costs borne by recruits who enlist at this age – including in relation to their long term welfare and employability.’

**Nick Harvey, former
Armed Forces Minister
(Lib Dem)**⁵¹

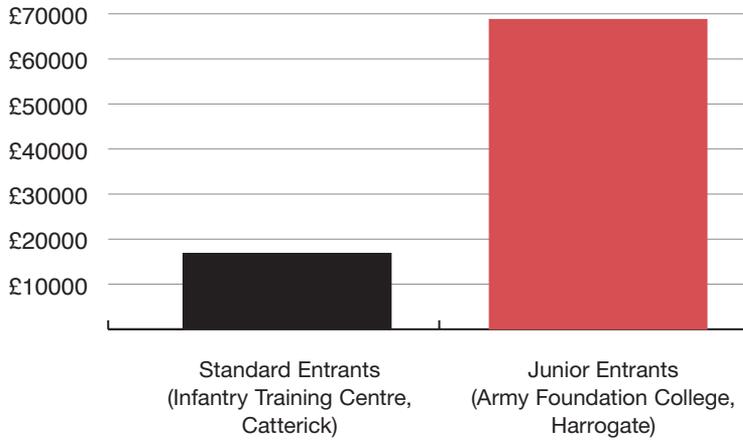
Young people who enlist under the age of 18 have no right to leave during their first six weeks. It is then possible to leave (at up to three months’ notice) until six months have passed from the date of enlistment or until a soldier turns 18 (whichever is later).⁴⁰ Thereafter, soldiers **cannot leave until their 22nd birthday**.⁴¹

So, the army does restrict the right to leave. In effect, it also requires each of its underage recruits to **make a decision as a minor at enlistment that will bind them later in adulthood**.

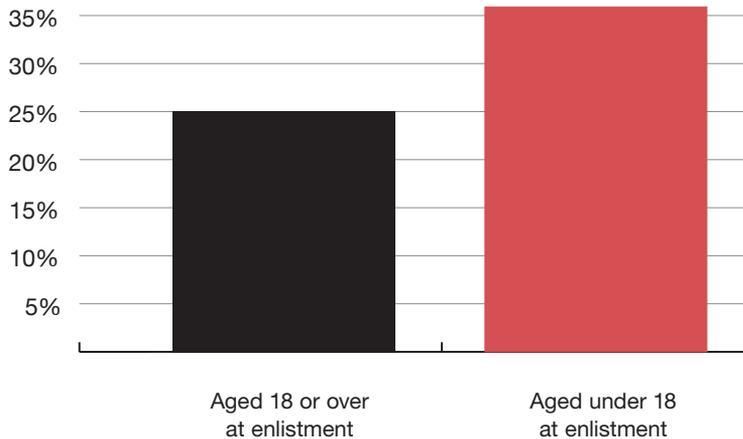
The terms of service also discriminate against the youngest recruits. A soldier who enlists as an adult can leave **after four years** but a soldier who joins under the age of 18 cannot. Instead, they must wait for **up to two more years** – i.e. until they turn 22 – before they are allowed to leave.⁴² The rule is plainly unjust.

In all cases, the right to leave is deferred if a soldier is convicted of certain military offences, such as leaving the army without permission (‘going AWOL’), speaking to the media, or disobeying an order. These laws, which a civilian court would not recognise, apply to minors and adults alike – there is no juvenile justice system in the armed forces.

Cost of Phase 1 training per infantry trainee (2014)⁴³



Army trainees discharged before joining trained strength (%) (2010-11 to 2012-13)⁴⁴



8.

‘Wouldn’t the army be short of soldiers if it stopped recruiting from age 16?’

No. Recruiting from 16 is a policy choice, not a necessity. The army is capable of filling its ranks without enlisting from such a young age.

‘The National Union of Teachers remains profoundly concerned at the British Armed Forces’ continued recruitment of young people under the age of 18. Our members are deeply disturbed by this as they can see the serious consequences of young people joining the forces without a complete understanding of the dangers and the potential impact on their mental health and families – let alone the disruption to their education. The mark of a civilised society is that it should not expose young people to adult activities when they are still children...’

Christine Blower,
General Secretary, NUT⁵⁰

The number of 16 and 17 year olds joining the army has been in decline and, because around a third drop out during training, they account for only about **15 per cent** of soldiers joining the ‘trained strength’ each year.⁴⁵

The army’s recent downsizing will allow it to fill the ranks with just a small increase in its intake of adult recruits.⁴⁶ It is likely that this small additional requirement could be met from those who now enlist before reaching 18 but, if they could not, would still join as adults. The army would also benefit from recruits who are more mature, can be deployed to war zones straight after training, and do not need the separate duty of care arrangements that are required by law for minors.

Most countries now recruit only adults into their armed forces. The UK is the only major military power worldwide, the only country in Europe, the only member of NATO, and the only Permanent Member of the UN Security Council still recruiting 16 year olds directly into its armed forces.⁴⁷ There is **no demographic reason** why the UK should be unable to field an army by recruiting adults only, as most comparable nations do.

9.

‘Isn’t it true that the youngest recruits get promoted faster?’

In fact, the opposite is the case: adult recruits are more likely to do well in the army.

‘[W]e would welcome further information on why the Army is so dependent on recruiting personnel under the age of 18 years compared to the other two Services, and whether steps are being taken to reduce this dependency.’

Only adults can join as commissioned officers, so younger recruits have to enlist at the lowest rank. They are then **less likely than adult recruits to be promoted** through the ranks. After six to nine years in the army, those who joined youngest are less likely than adult recruits to have reached the rank of Corporal or Sergeant and more likely overall to have remained at the lowest rank.⁴⁹

House of Commons
Defence Committee⁴⁸

Education provision for young people leaving school without GCSEs

Standard	Army training for 16 year olds ⁵²	Civilian college
Sub-GCSE level courses	✓	✓
GCSE re-sits with support	✗	✓
Wide choice of subjects	✗	✓
Options for A Levels or equivalent	✗	✓
All entrants meet Raised Participation Age standards	✗	✓
All entrants offered route to Government's recommended minimum standard (A*-C grades in core GCSEs)	✗	✓
Unrestricted freedom to leave or change college at any time	✗	✓
Ofsted inspects child welfare arrangements	✓	✓
Meets Ofsted standards for a college of further education	✗	✓

10. ‘But the youngest recruits stay in the army for longer – doesn’t that save money on recruitment?’

On the contrary, it costs the army between three and four times as much to train a Junior Soldier as an adult recruit. This is because training for the youngest recruits is much longer and they are more likely than adults to leave before they join the ‘trained strength’.⁵³

‘Recruiting under-18s to the Armed Forces isn’t good for them or taxpayers.’

John Glen MP (Con)⁵⁷

If the youngest recruits stayed in the army for three or four times longer than adult recruits then that would balance out their higher training costs, but they stay only one-third longer on average (if they complete their training, which many do not).⁵⁴

This makes the policy of recruiting from age 16 very expensive. We have calculated that raising the enlistment age to 18 would save the taxpayer approximately **£50 million per year**. Due to the lower trainee drop-out rate among adult recruits, raising the recruitment age would allow the army to recruit around **200 fewer soldiers** annually.⁵⁵

The House of Commons Defence Committee asked the army to review the costs and benefits of the policy, but the army’s response contained so many serious errors that its findings were unusable.⁵⁶ The Committee referred it to the National Audit Office.

11.

‘At 16 you’re an adult – you can get married, so why shouldn’t you be able to join the army?’

The age of majority is 18, as defined in national and international law. Below this age young people have a legal right to special protection from making decisions that incur an undue risk of harm.

‘I’m really uncomfortable with... how we sold the army to young people; I feel like I was party to some fairly questionable stuff.’

Richard Pendleton,
former marketing
executive on the
Army contract.⁶¹

The law prohibits 16 and 17 year olds from buying knives, fireworks, tobacco or alcohol, and from gambling. 18 is the minimum age for working in the police, fire and ambulance services, due to the risks and responsibilities of these jobs. While the army can train a 16 year old to kill another person with a firearm or bayonet, the same trainee is prohibited from watching graphic war films or playing 18-rated games such as *Call of Duty*.

The comparison of the army and marriage is not an apt one. In 2011/12, 16 year olds made up **14 per cent** of new army recruits, but were party to just **0.04 per cent** of marriages.⁵⁸ And while the state discourages young people from teenage marriage and pregnancy, it actively encourages early enlistment into the army. Indeed, recruitment materials tend to glamorise military life, gloss over the dangers, and present teenagers with a misleadingly sanitised picture of warfare, rather than set out the risks and obligations clearly.⁵⁹

The army recruits 16 year olds with a reading age **as low as five**, which is too low to read and fully understand the legally binding enlistment papers.⁶⁰ Signing those papers removes many rights familiar to a civilian, such as the right to free speech, the right of union representation, the right to choose one’s work, and the right to be tried for alleged offences in the juvenile justice system. No-one under the age of 18 should be encouraged to sign away such fundamental rights as these.

12.

‘Why compare young British soldiers with children forced to fight in Africa or Asia?’

Recruitment by the British army should be distinguished from children's forced participation in armed conflict elsewhere, but the one bears upon the other. It may be no coincidence that more than half of the countries still recruiting from age 16 are in the Commonwealth.⁶²

‘We are united in opposing the [military] recruitment of children. We call for the minimum recruitment age to be returned to 18 years.’

Joint letter by the Church of Scotland, the Bishops of the Church in Wales and other faith groups, 2013.⁶³

The UK government actively participates in international efforts to end the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict, but its own recruitment policy stands out internationally for all the wrong reasons. For as long as it continues to recruit from age 16, the UK will lend legitimacy to states and armed groups that recruit children for use in hostilities, and which may have no safeguards at all for children.

In 2000, the minimum age for military recruitment was set globally at 16. This followed the UK’s refusal to accept the strong majority view during negotiations – that it should be 18. Nonetheless, most state armed forces now recruit only adult volunteers from age 18, which is becoming the global norm.

In view of the UK’s significance in the Commonwealth, United Nations Security Council, and other international institutions, raising its military recruitment age to 18 could lay the ground for a worldwide ban on recruiting anyone under the age of 18 into a military organisation. This would benefit generations of children around the world.

13. ‘Don’t most people support recruitment at 16?’

No – most people think the army should recruit only adults.

‘You are too young to join the armed forces at 16... If you were serious about the Convention [on the Rights of the Child], you would not expect [young people] to join the armed services until they are 18.’

**Maggie Atkinson,
former Children’s
Commissioner for
England⁶⁶**

A nationwide Ipsos MORI poll in 2014 asked an open question about what the age should be for joining the British army. **77 per cent** of respondents who expressed a view said it should be 18 or above; only **14 per cent** thought it should be 16 or less.⁶⁴

At various points, the Ministry of Defence has been challenged to review its recruitment age policy by the four Children’s Commissioners for England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland; the House of Commons Defence Committee; the Joint Committee on Human Rights; the Equality and Human Rights Commission; and the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child.

The major British children’s organisations and child rights organisations support a minimum enlistment age of 18, as do MPs from all major parties, Amnesty International, the National Union of Teachers, and many faith groups including the Church of Scotland and the Bishops of the Church in Wales.

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child ‘encourages the [UK] to ... 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’.⁶⁵



MAKE IT 18

Raising the minimum enlistment age to 18 would benefit young people, as more would stay in civilian education or training for longer. Having enhanced their employment potential for their whole working life, young people who wished to enlist could still do so – as adults – and choose from the full range of armed forces roles. The change would also ensure that the best interests of people aged under 18 could not be jeopardised by the many risks that come with joining the army at such a young age.

In addition, the change would save the taxpayer money and it could be achieved without leaving the armed forces short of recruits. Internationally, it would substantially strengthen initiatives to end the use of child soldiers.

The practice of recruiting soldiers from age 16 belongs to a bygone era. We believe that when change comes and the army is for adults only, few will look back.

About Child Soldiers International

Child Soldiers International envisions a world where all children can grow up realising their full potential and enjoying all their human rights.

For this to be possible, we believe that armed forces and groups must be prevented from recruiting, using or otherwise exploiting children in any way. Our goal is to end all recruitment, use and exploitation of children (people under the age of 18) by armed forces and groups.

Find out more at www.child-soldiers.org.

References

In order to save paper, the full references are not printed with this document but are available to view at <http://bit.ly/22mQCXu>