

The British armed forces: Why raising the recruitment age would benefit everyone

Read time: 5 min.

Context

Worldwide, three-quarters of armed forces now recruit only adults from age 18.¹ While some comparable militaries recruit adolescent children from age 17, the UK is the only major military power, the only European state, and one of only sixteen in the world, to enlist from age 16.²

In 2020–21, the UK enlisted 3,260 under-18s.³ 7 in 10 joined the army, making up a quarter of its intake; more soldiers are recruited at 16 than any other age.⁴ Tending to come from deprived areas,⁵ these younger recruits are particularly sought for lower-skilled, higher-risk infantry jobs.⁶

Support for change is widespread. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child,⁷ Parliament's Human Rights committee,⁸ the Children's Commissioners,⁹ major children's organisations,¹⁰ and human rights groups¹¹ have all called for an end to child recruitment, as have health professionals,¹² faith groups,¹³ trade unions,¹⁴ and veterans.¹⁵ The Defence Committee has repeatedly challenged the Ministry of Defence (MoD) to account for its dependence on underage recruits.¹⁶ 72% of the public believe the enlistment age should be 18 or above; only 19% think it should be 16, according to a 2018 ICM poll.¹⁷

Enlistment obligations and consent

Military enlistment suspends fundamental rights and imposes legally binding obligations.¹⁸ 16-year-old army recruits have no right to leave the army from the day they turn 18 until age 22,¹⁹ having completed a period of mandatory service up to two years longer than that required of adult recruits.²⁰ As such, the state expects child recruits, whose capacity for consequential decision-making has yet to develop fully, to consent to obligations that could not be imposed on a civilian worker of any age.²¹ The question of consent is complicated further when enlisting children with a stressful childhood background, which can impair complex decision-making in adolescence²² and is common among young recruits.²³

Despite such susceptibilities, army marketing glamorises military life while omitting its risks,²⁴ recruiters are not required to meet directly with parents,²⁵ and a quarter of 16-year-old soldiers are enlisted with a reading age of 11 or less.²⁶ The UN has warned that the UK's consent safeguards are 'insufficient'.²⁷

Impact on mental health and behaviour

Research by King's College has found that UK personnel are twice as likely as working civilians to suffer anxiety and depression and 50% more likely than the general population to have PTSD.²⁸

Compared with adults, adolescent children, particularly those with a stressful childhood background,²⁹ are neurodevelopmentally more vulnerable to stress.³⁰ Accordingly, the prolonged stress of basic soldier training, which the army describes as 'intense',³¹ is incompatible with the legal right of all children to be safeguarded against conditions harmful to their health and development.³²

Recent research by Glasgow University compared long-term mental health outcomes of child recruits and same-age civilians. The study found little difference for those who joined up more than 25 years ago, but child recruits enlisted from around 1995 had between two and three times the odds of long-term PTSD compared to civilians from similar social backgrounds.³³ Similar research by King's College found that, since 2003, soldiers recruited aged 16–17½ have had 'twice the odds of alcohol misuse and twice the odds of reporting episodes of lifetime self-harm' relative to those recruited at older ages.³⁴

Since 2001, soldiers under 20 have been twice as likely as those over 20, and 40% more likely than same-age civilians, to end their lives.³⁵

Despite a common assumption that early enlistment reduces problem behaviours, it appears to aggravate them. A King's College study found that violent, sexual, and drug-related offending increased after enlistment, even before deployment, when it rose again to reach twice the pre-enlistment rate.³⁶

Training: Education and treatment

The army's youngest recruits undergo initial training at the Army Foundation College (AFC). The centre's 'outstanding' Ofsted grade is awarded under a bespoke arrangement with the MoD that excludes the main standards by which civilian colleges are judged.^{37 38 39 40} GCSE resits, which civilian colleges are required to offer, are not available.⁴¹ Instead, most 16-year-old recruits spend less than a day a week on sub-GCSE courses^{42 43} and follow an apprenticeship consisting of basic soldier training.⁴⁴ The army has ruled out extending the education offered at AFC, on the basis that it 'risks discouraging and therefore reducing the main recruiting pool'.⁴⁵

AFC is subject to multiple allegations of abuse by its staff; 60 formal complaints of violence by instructors against recruits have been recorded since 2014.⁴⁶ Ofsted's 2018 report does not mention this.⁴⁷

Between 2015 and 2020, girls under 18 in the armed forces made 31 formal complaints of sexual assault or rape to the military police. This equivalent to a rate of 2.5% (or one report for every 40 girls in the forces),⁴⁸ double that found among civilian girls of the same age.⁴⁹

Socio-economic outcomes

It is sometimes suggested that early enlistment offers a route out of unemployment. In fact, and as the MoD accepts,⁵⁰ recruiters are in competition with the civilian education system, where four out of five of disadvantaged 16-year-olds now continue in full-time learning with a high rate of retention.^{51 52}

Early enlistment is highly precarious by comparison. 30% of underage army recruits, about 700 per year, drop out of training, which puts them out of education and work within a few months of joining up.⁵³

Although the army argues that those who remain in service are more likely than adult recruits to rise through the ranks,⁵⁴ this is not the case. Underage recruits who are still in the army after 10 years are half as likely as adult recruits to have reached the rank of Sergeant or above.⁵⁵

The military case for change

The transition to all-adult armed forces would bring many benefits. Recruits would be more mature, more likely to finish training, deployable sooner, and not subject to the complexities of children's rights law. Since the cost of training an adult for the infantry is only half that of training a 16-year-old to the same standard⁵⁶ (for an average career only 40% longer⁵⁷), the public purse would save c. £50m per year.⁵⁸

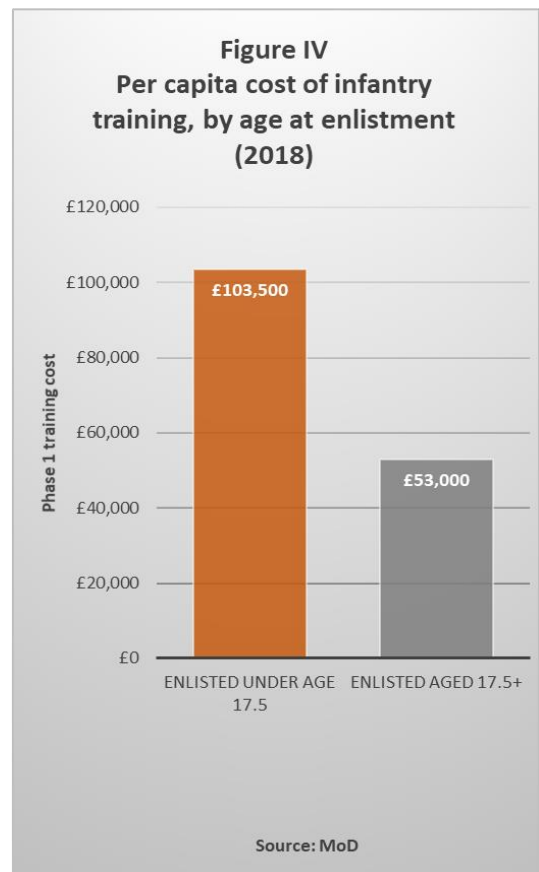
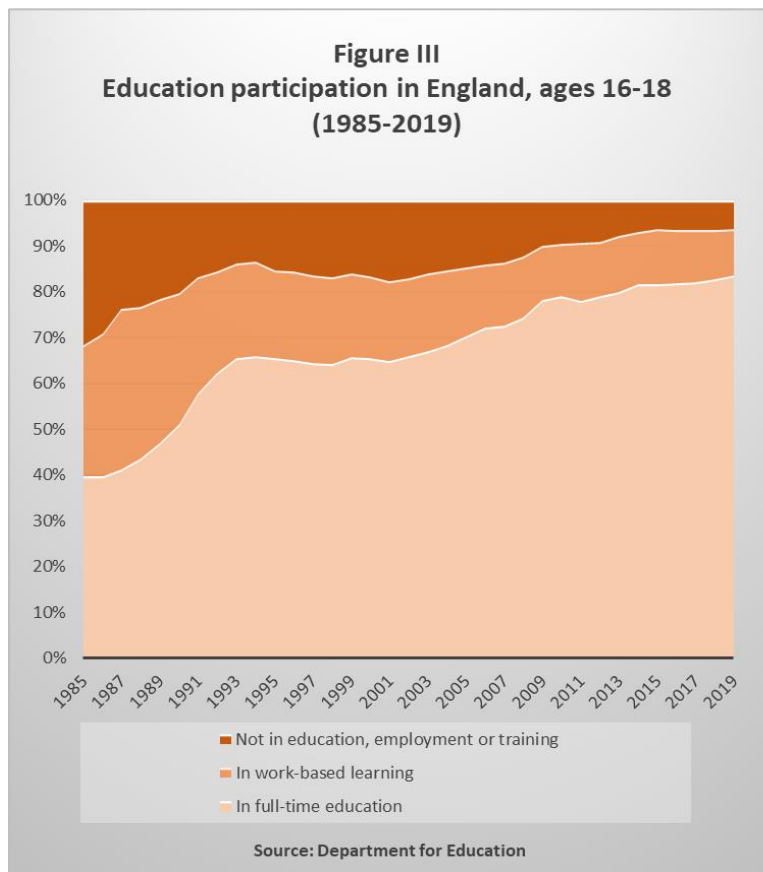
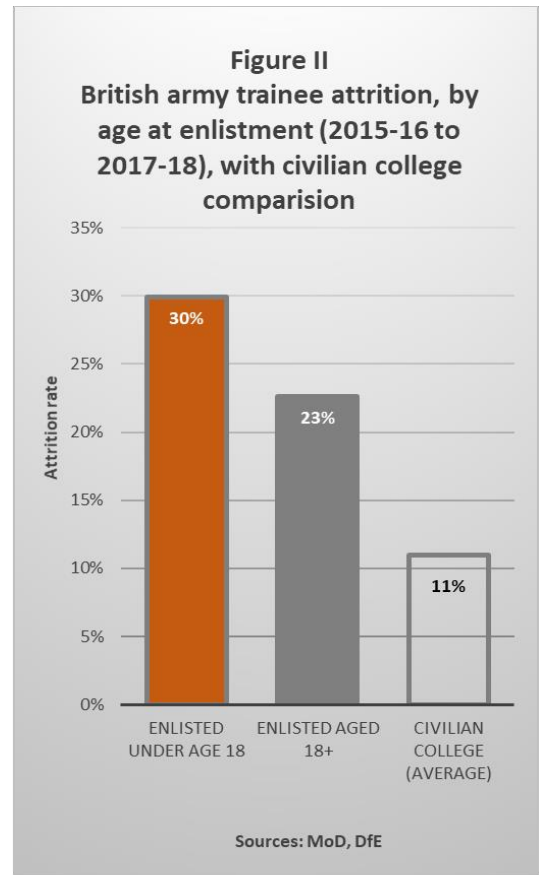
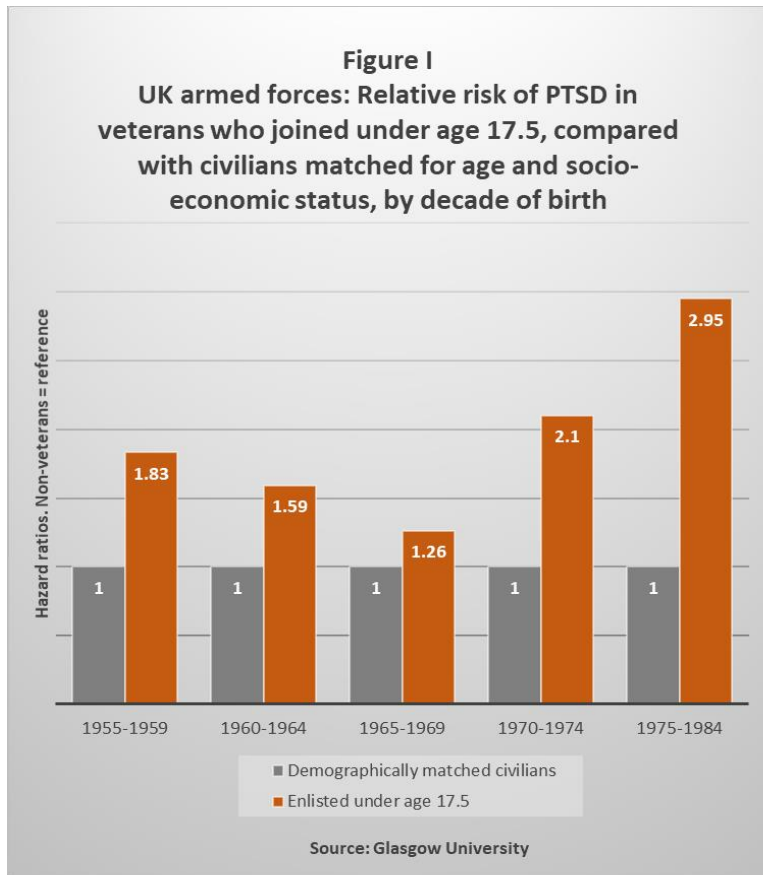
The change is feasible. The navy and RAF take relatively few recruits under 18. The army, which enlists many more, was downsized by one-fifth in 2012 and is to be reduced further by nearly 10,000 troops by 2025.⁵⁹ As we have shown elsewhere, this reduction is sufficient to allow the army to recruit adults alone at the current rate without detriment to the trained strength.⁶⁰

Make it 18

Raising the enlistment age to 18 would safeguard children from the risks associated with premature enlistment: onerous legal obligations, high trainee attrition, a disproportionate impact on mental health, educational disadvantage, and multiple allegations of maltreatment. It would leave unaffected the option of a military career in adulthood, until which point more 16-year-olds would stay in education or training for longer to gain accredited qualifications for lifelong employment.

The growing global consensus that military work should be reserved for adulthood has already benefited countless children. By continuing to enlist from age 16, the UK lends legitimacy to others to do the same. In view of the UK's influence, particularly with other Commonwealth countries that recruit under 18, the transition to all-adult forces would be a major step towards an end to child recruitment worldwide.

Appendix⁶¹



Notes and references

- ¹ For sources and detail, see Dallaire Institute, *Child Soldiers World Index*, 2020, <https://childsoldiersworldindex.org>.
- ² The UK is the only major military power, the only country in Europe, the only NATO member, and the only Permanent Member of the UN Security Council to allow the enlistment from age 16 in law. The others are mostly also Commonwealth states (Bangladesh, Canada, India, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Trinidad & Tobago, Zambia), in addition to Cuba, Dominican Republic, Egypt, El Salvador, Iran, Mauritania, and United Arab Emirates. *Ibid*.
- ³ MoD, *Biannual diversity statistics*, 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/uk-armed-forces-biannual-diversity-statistics-2021>.
- ⁴ In 2020–21, the army enlisted 2,410 16- and 17-year-olds, 25.8% of the total enlisted intake. On average, in the last five years to 2020–21, more new enlistees have been 16 than any other age. MoD, *Biannual diversity statistics*, 2021, *op cit*.
- ⁵ Army marketing is targeted specifically at neighbourhoods where households earn less than £10,000 per year. H Agerholm, 'British Army targets recruitment of young working class, military document reveals', *Independent*, 10 July 2017. The army recognises that 'the majority of the current JE cohort' have a 'tendency to live in poorer areas'. British army, 'Junior Entry Review – Final Report', 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/rq33o8t>, p. 2. Over a five-year period from 2013 to 2018 in England, the rate of recruitment of 16- and 17-year-olds into the British army was 57% higher in the most deprived fifth of constituencies than the least deprived fifth. C Cooper and D Gee, 'Youngest British army recruits come disproportionately from England's most deprived constituencies', 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/yx8osqhz>.
- ⁶ According to the MoD, Junior Entry recruitment (aged 16-17.5 years) 'presents an opportunity to mitigate Standard Entry (SE) shortfalls, particularly for the Infantry'. 'SE' refers to recruits aged 17.5 years and above. MoD, *Policy on recruiting Under-18s (U18)*, 2013, obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, Ref. FOI2015/00618, 12 February 2015, p. 2, <https://tinyurl.com/wzos8xw>. Official sources show that the British infantry's rate of fatality and serious injury in Afghanistan was seven times higher than the rest of the armed forces. 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.
- ⁷ Committee on the Rights of the Child, Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (CRC/C/GBR/CO/5), 2016, <https://bit.ly/2Qx1zE5>, pp. 23-24.
- ⁸ House of Commons Defence Committee (HCDC), *The armed forces covenant in action? Part 4: Education of service personnel (Fifth Report of Session 2013-14)*, 2013. See also Tobias Ellwood MP, Letter to Minister for the Armed Forces, James Heapey MP, 1 December 2020, <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/4243/documents/43272/default>. The Committee's predecessors also called on the MoD to 'examine the potential impact of raising the recruitment age for all three Services to 18', in HCDC, *Duty of care (Third Report of Session 2004-5)*, 2005. See also Joint Committee on Human Rights, *Children's rights (Twenty-fifth Report of Session 2008-09)*, 2009, which is the Committee's most recent inquiry to date into children's rights.
- ⁹ For example, in their joint report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in December 2020, all four UK Children's Commissioners stated, 'Despite the Committee's recommendations, the UK continues to enlist children in the Armed Forces from 16, and actively recruit 16- and 17-year-olds. They enlist over 2,000 children annually, and target areas of deprivation to recruit young people.' They urged the Committee ask the UK, 'Will the State Party raise the age of recruitment to the Armed Forces to 18?'. UK Children's Commissioners, 'Report of the Children's Commissioners of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child', 2020, <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/cco-uncrc-report.pdf>.
- ¹⁰ Major children's organisations calling on the UK to raise the enlistment age to 18 include the Children's Society, Save the Children, and Unicef UK. See Child Rights International Network and others, Letter to Secretary of State for Defence, Ben Wallace MP, 22 June 2021, <https://home.crin.org/readlistenwatch/stories/joint-letter-mod>; Child Soldiers International and others, Letter to Minister of State for the Armed Forces, Penny Mordaunt MP, 23 May 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/csi-2016-letter>; and Save the Children UK, *Stop the war on children*, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/saveuk>, p. 54.
- ¹¹ Child Rights International Network, Letter to Ben Wallace MP, 2021, *op cit*. Signatories included the Children's Commissioners for Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, Amnesty, Liberty, Human Rights Watch, War Child, and the child rights umbrella bodies for England, Scotland, and Wales.
- ¹² *Ibid*.
- ¹³ Child Soldiers International and others, Letter to the Minister of State for the Armed Forces, Mark François MP, 6 November 2013, <https://tinyurl.com/v9cympa>. Signatories included the Church of Scotland, all the bishops of the Church in Wales, and others.
- ¹⁴ Trades Union Congress, 'UK Compliance with major ILO Conventions 2019', 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/rwvayho>; Trades Union Congress and Child Rights International Network, 'Annex 3: Armed Forces Recruitment and Convention 182', 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/vry9n2h>. For NEU support, see Child Rights International Network and others, 2021, *op cit*.
- ¹⁵ Tracy McVeigh, 'War veterans call for rethink on recruitment of 16-year-olds', *Observer*, 21 June 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/jun/21/war-veterans-call-for-britain-to-stop-enlisting-teenage-soldiers>.
- ¹⁶ Ellwood, 2020, *op cit*.
- ¹⁷ ICM poll conducted in July 2018 on behalf of Child Soldiers International. Poll question: 'Regardless of what you believe the current minimum age to be, what do you think should be the minimum age to join the British Army?' Figures extrapolated from poll data, excluding 5% 'don't know'.
- ¹⁸ Among the human rights that enlistment suspends are: the right to free speech, the right of union representation, the right to choose one's work, and the right of minors to be tried for alleged offences in the juvenile justice system. See Child Soldiers International, *Out of step, out of time: Recruitment of minors by the British armed forces*, 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/v2bkwzs>.
- ¹⁹ Soldiers who enlist as adults and serve for four years may leave the army; those who enlist as minors and serve for four years must wait until they turn 22 before becoming eligible to leave. Under-18s cannot leave the armed forces at will during the first few months; they have no right to leave at all during the first six weeks, after which a 14-day notice-period applies, and after the first six months a three-month notice period applies. The Army Terms of Service Regulations 2007, no. 3382 (as amended, 2008, no. 1849).
- ²⁰ *Ibid*.
- ²¹ During early adolescence, certain brain structures that drive short-term, emotionally-driven, reward-oriented behaviour develop before those that provide capacity to anticipate long-term consequences. In mid-adolescence, at around the age at which children may be enlisted into the armed forces, this second type of structure usually remains underdeveloped. Consequently, it is more difficult for a young person at 16, than as an adult, to weigh the potential downsides of an apparently appealing career option. R Louise, C Hunter, S Zlotowitz, 'The recruitment of children by the UK armed forces: A critique from health professionals', 2016, <https://www.medact.org/2016/resources/reports/recruitment-children-uk-armed-forces>; K D Baker, M L Den, B M Graham, et al., 'A

- window of vulnerability: Impaired fear extinction in adolescence', *Neurobiology of Learning and Memory*, 2014, 113, pp. 90–100; J N Giedd, M Keshavan, T Paus, 'Why do many psychiatric disorders emerge during adolescence?' *Nature Reviews, Neuroscience*, 2008, 9(12), pp. 947–957.
- ²² The developmentally limited ability to make consequential decisions is particularly marked among those living in conditions of stress, such as those associated with socio-economic deprivation. A Galván & K M McGlennen, 'Daily stress increases risky decision-making in adolescents: A preliminary study', *Developmental Psychobiology*, 2012, 54(4), pp. 433–40; M M Kishiyama, W T Boyce, A M Jimenez et al., 'Socioeconomic disparities affect prefrontal function in children', *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*, 2009, 21(6), pp. 1106–1115; D Hackman & M J Farah, 'Socioeconomic status and the developing brain', *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 2009, 13(2), pp. 65–73.
- ²³ A high degree of stress in childhood is characteristic of a quarter of armed forces personnel. D Murphy and D Turgoose, 'Childhood adversity and mental health in veterans seeking treatment for mental health difficulties: Comparisons with the general military population', *Psychological Trauma*, December 2019 [preprint].
- ²⁴ R Louise et al., 2016, op cit.
- ²⁵ MoD, *Armed Forces: Young People - Written question – 223161*, 3 February 2015, <https://bit.ly/2FntPHW>; MoD, *Armed Forces: Young People - Written question – 227584*, 16 March 2015, <https://bit.ly/2VQgHQO>; and information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, 20 May 2015, Ref. FOI2015/04176, <https://tinyurl.com/rwsw7j2>.
- ²⁶ 24–26% of recruits at the Army Foundation College in the year 2019–20 were assessed on arrival to have literacy and numeracy skills at Entry Level 3 or lower (equivalent to that expected of a 9–11-year-old). Information obtained under Freedom of Information Act, FOI2020/07026, 10 August 2020, <https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/671628/response/1614867/attach/4/20200708%20FOI07026%20Final%20Response.pdf>.
- ²⁷ 'Safeguards for voluntary recruitment are insufficient, particularly in the light of the very low literacy level of the majority of under-18 recruits and the fact that briefing materials provided to child applicants and their parents or guardians do not clearly inform them of the risks and obligations that follow their enlistment.' CRC, *Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of the United Kingdom*, op cit., p. 23.
- ²⁸ L Goodwin, S Wessely, M Hotopf, et al., 'Are common mental disorders more prevalent in the UK serving military compared to the general working population?', *Psychological Medicine*, 2014, 45(9), pp. 1881–1891; S A M Stevelink, M Jones, L Hull, et al., 'Mental health outcomes at the end of the British involvement in the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts: a cohort study', *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 2018, 213(6), pp. 690–697.
- ²⁹ M M Kishiyama et al., 'Socioeconomic disparities affect prefrontal function in children', op cit.; D Hackman & M J Farah, 'Socioeconomic status and the developing brain', op cit.
- ³⁰ A measure of stress in adolescence is healthy, but a high-stress environment becomes toxic. Relative to adults, adolescents are temperamentally more anxious, more likely to experience depressed mood and emotional volatility, and more reactive to stressors, such that they react to stressors with greater anxiety and then remain anxious for longer. Under stress, adolescents are more likely than adults to develop anxiety-related mental health problems, such as depression. The adolescent brain is also more sensitive to repeated or prolonged stress, under which its transition to full maturation is compromised, particularly the development of brain structures involved in the regulation of emotions; there is some evidence that this can lead to lasting problems with anxiety in adulthood. L P Spear, 'The adolescent brain and age-related behavioral manifestations', *Neuroscience and Behavioral Reviews*, 2000, 24(4), pp. 417–463; J N Giedd, et al., 'Why do many psychiatric disorders emerge during adolescence?' op cit.; K D Baker et al., 'A window of vulnerability: Impaired fear extinction in adolescence', op cit.; M L Den, S R Altmann, R Richardson, 'A comparison of the short- and long-term effects of corticosterone exposure on extinction in adolescence versus adulthood', *Behavioral Neuroscience*, 2014, 128(6), pp. 722–735.
- ³¹ The British army describes basic training as 'intense'. British army, 'Army Foundation College Commanding Officer's Supervisory Care and Safeguarding Directive Risk Assessment', 2018, point 2.1. Information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, ref. FOI2019/05572, 10 June 2019.
- ³² Convention on the Rights of the Child, Art. 32: 'States Parties recognise the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development.'
- ³³ B P Bergman, D F Mackay, N T Fear, and J P Pell, 'Age at entry to UK military service and long-term mental health', *BMJ Military Health*, 2021, <https://militaryhealth.bmj.com/content/early/2021/04/08/bmjilitary-2021-001786>.
- ³⁴ M Jones, N Jones, H Burdett, et al., 'Do Junior Entrants to the UK Armed Forces have worse outcomes than Standard Entrants?', *BMJ Military Health*, 2021, <https://militaryhealth.bmj.com/content/early/2021/04/08/bmjilitary-2021-001787>.
- ³⁵ In addition, the suicide rate among soldiers under 20 is between two and three times as high as among navy and RAF personnel in the same age group. Figures apply to the period between 2001 and 2020. See additional tables 3, 4, additional figure 10 in MoD, 'UK armed forces suicides: 2020', 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/uk-armed-forces-suicides-2020> [spreadsheet].
- ³⁶ A study of veterans (all ages) of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars found that they were twice as likely to commit a violent crime after homecoming than before they enlisted. Even soldiers who were not sent to war were found to be more likely to commit violent offences after they enlisted than before. D MacManus, K Dean, M Jones et al., 'Violent offending by UK military personnel deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan: A data linkage cohort study', *The Lancet*, 2013, 381, pp. 907–917.
- ³⁷ See Annex B in Ofsted, 'Welfare and duty of care in armed forces initial training', 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/welfare-and-duty-of-care-in-armed-forces-initial-training>.
- ³⁸ 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.' DfE, *Army Foundation College – Written question – 209858*, 17 January 2019, <https://bit.ly/2RmLu43>.
- ³⁹ The army notes that moving to a 'non-enlistment' model at AFC – such as full time education or full time employment – 'would require supervisory care ratios that were higher than the current model, imposing both risk and cost. Any further education college that educates "young people" for more than 295 days pa (42 weeks) must register as a "children's home" and school. The Army is not resourced for such an establishment'. British army, 'Junior Entry Review', 2019, op cit., p. 5.
- ⁴⁰ Since 2015 the Education and Skills Act (2008) has required all young people aged 16 and 17 to continue to participate in education. Those in full-time employment must complete 280 guided learning hours of education annually towards accredited qualifications. It is this part of the Act from which the armed forces are exempt. The exemption is specified in The Duty to Participate in Education or Training (Miscellaneous Provisions) Regulations 2013, no. 1205.
- ⁴¹ MoD, *Armed Forces: GCSE - Written question – 33689*, 18 April 2016, <https://bit.ly/2RGa97O>.
- ⁴² The three subjects available at the Army Foundation College are short, Functional Skills courses in English, maths and ICT at Level 1, each graded at 45 guided learning hours, with an option to progress to Level 2 in each subject. The Wolf Review of Education described

Functional Skills courses as 'conceptually incoherent' and said they 'suffer from major and fundamental flaws'. It also emphasised that Functional Skills awards at Level 2 are not equivalent to GCSEs at Level 2 (grades A*-C). A Wolf, *Review of Vocational Education* (London: Department for Education), 2011, p. 170.

⁴³ Recruits who arrive without Level 2 qualifications in English, maths or ICT are enrolled on FS courses in all three subjects at Level 1, with the option of progressing to Level 2, which combined entail 80 hours' teaching time per subject (240 hours across all three subjects). Over the 49 week 'long course' at AFC, and allowing for the eight weeks of holiday, 240 hours is equivalent to 5.9 hours per week. See MoD, information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, ref. FOI2020/00269/10/06, 5 February 2020.

⁴⁴ The learning outcomes of the army's Public Services apprenticeship are listed at Institute for Apprenticeships & Technical Education, 'HM Forces Serviceperson (Public Services)', 2016, <https://www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/apprenticeship-standards/hm-forces-serviceperson-public-services>.

⁴⁵ British army, 'Junior Entry Review', 2019, op cit., p. 1.

⁴⁶ MoD, Parliamentary Question no. 109376, 30 October 2020, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2020-10-30/109376>.

⁴⁷ Ofsted, *Welfare and duty of care in armed forces initial training*, 2018, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/708775/Welfare_and_duty_of_care_in_Armed_Forces_initial_training_2017-18.pdf, pp. 37–38.

⁴⁸ Between 2015 and 2020 inclusive, the armed forces Service Police recorded 31 sexual offences against girls aged 16–17, representing an average rate of 2.5% in the age group. In 2020, for example, the service police recorded eight sexual offences against girls in the age group, who numbered 280 at the time (8 / 280 = 2.9%). Information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, ref. FOI2021/09403, 21 September 2021; MoD, 'UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics: 2021', 2021, op cit.

⁴⁹ In 2019–20, police in England and Wales recorded 101,478 sexual offences (assault or rape) committed against women and girls, of which 7.3% (7,408) affected girls aged 16–17, representing a rate of 1.2% (7,408 offences / 618,095 population aged 16–17 in 2019). ONS, 'Dataset: Sexual offences prevalence and victim characteristics, England and Wales (2019-20)', 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/ons-sexual-offences-2019-20>; ONS, 'Population estimates for the UK, England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland: mid-2020' (Figure 8, 2019, England and Wales only), 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/ons-pop-2019>.

⁵⁰ See, for example, James Heapey, MP, Minister of State for the Armed Forces, Letter to Tobias Ellwood MP, 17 December 2020, <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/4243/documents/43272/default/>; and British army, 'Junior Entry Review', 2019, op cit.

⁵¹ The cited statistic relates to England. 'Disadvantaged' is defined by the Department for Education (DfE) as school students eligible for free school meals or in care, of whom 81% were continuing in education after Key Stage 4 (normally GCSE level) for a 'sustained period' in 2018. DfE, 'National table NA21b: Pupil destinations after completing key stage 4 by disadvantage status and gender, state-funded schools (mainstream and special)', https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/840011/Destinations_of_KS4_and_16_to_18_students_2018_-_key_stage_4_national_tables ods.

⁵² In 2018–19, the retention rate in full-time education in England for the post-16 age group was 89.3%, varying little by qualification level. DfE, '2018 to 2019 education and training NARTs overall headline' [see table 'Headline', cell H7], 2020, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/874715/Education_and_Training_Over_all_Headline_Achievement_Rates_Tables_201819.xlsx.

⁵³ In the three-year period 2015–16 to 2017–18, the army enlisted 5,280 recruits aged under 18, of whom 1,580 (30.0%) dropped out before completing their Phase 2 training. Applied to the most recent financial year, 2020–21, when the army enlisted 2,410 children, a 30% dropout rate is equivalent to 723 individuals. MoD, *Biannual diversity statistics*, 2021, op cit.; Ministerial answer to Parliamentary Question no. 103588, 14 October 2020, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2020-10-14/103588>. (Note: figures from 2018–19 have been excluded since some recruits who enlisted during that year had not completed their training at the time the drop-out statistics were generated.)

⁵⁴ See, for example, British army, 'Junior Entry Review', 2019, op cit., p. 3, where the army confuses the proportion of senior NCOs who enlisted under 18 with the proportion of enlistees under 18 who were promoted to senior NCO.

⁵⁵ Of the 2,650 minors who enlisted in the three-year period between 2006-07 and 2008-09 and were still in the army ten years later, 290 had attained the rank of Sergeant or above (10%). Of the 4,960 adults who enlisted in the same period and were still in the army ten years later, 1,130 had attained the rank of Sergeant or above (20%). MoD, Information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, 12 February 2020, Ref: FOI2020/00600/04/02, https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/evidence_of_career_promotion_amo_2?nocache=incoming-1524787#incoming-1524787

⁵⁶ Cost of infantry training by age at enlistment: 16–17½ years, £103,500; 17½+ years, £53,000. MoD, *Army: Training – Written question – 128438*, 19 February 2018, <https://bit.ly/2FgT51K>.

⁵⁷ Soldiers who enlist as adults serve an average of 7 years, 10 months, versus 11 years for younger recruits, whose typical career is therefore 40% longer. During the first two years when they are still under 18, however, the younger age group cannot be deployed. British army, 'Junior Entry Review', 2019, op cit., p. 3.

⁵⁸ ForcesWatch and Child Soldiers International, 'Army recruitment: Comparative cost-effectiveness of recruiting from age 16 versus age 18', September 2014, <https://tinyurl.com/csi-fw-costs>.

⁵⁹ The army's full-time trained strength requirement in 2008 was 101,800; in 2018 it was 82,646, 19% smaller. N Dempsey, 'UK defence personnel statistics', 2018, p. 17, <https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-7930>. See also BBC News, 'Defence review: British army to be cut to 72,500 troops by 2025', 22 March 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-56477900>.

⁶⁰ See C Cooper and D Gee, 'Has the time come for an all-adult army?', *RUSI Commentary*, 27 May 2021, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/has-time-come-all-adult-army>; and D Gee and R Taylor, 'Is it counterproductive to enlist minors into the army?', *RUSI Journal*, 2016, 161, pp. 36–48.

⁶¹ Sources for figures:

Figure 1: Bergman et al., 2021, op cit.

Figure II: MoD, *UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics*, 2021, op cit.; Ministerial answer to Parliamentary Question no. 103588, 14 October 2020, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2020-10-14/103588>; DfE, '2018 to 2019 education and training NARTs overall headline' [see table 'Headline', cell H7], 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/educ-particip>.

Figure III: DfE, 'National table NA10: Pupil destinations after completing key stage 4, state-funded mainstream schools', <https://tinyurl.com/educ-particip2>.

Figure IV: MoD, *Army: Training – Written question – 128438*, 19 February 2018, <https://bit.ly/2FgT51K>.