

## **The Pressure Cooker**

Child recruitment and suicide in the  
British armed forces •



## Content Warning

- ▶ This report discusses suicide and many types of mental health experiences including depression. If you need to talk to someone, please call the Samaritans on 116 123 - any time, any day.

"The recruits are looking for fights more and more. There's no support from the corporals, no concern about our welfare, so fights start to happen – never for good reasons, just fights. And bullying is everywhere... I tell the people in the welfare office but they just say it'll all be over soon, which is no help at all... So I fall off. For the first time I think about ending my life, taking a weapon when we're on the range and firing shots in my head."

**Joe trained at the Army Foundation College, 2013–2014, aged 16.**

"Nathan... told me he was hit, slapped, pushed, kicked and verbally abused by staff... He started drinking heavily and was very withdrawn... He told me his request [to leave] was ripped up in his face. He was only 17 [with a legal right to leave] and devastated at not being able to leave... He didn't mind the legitimate punishments, it was the abuse he was scared of. He described the staff as animals that got off on hurting and humiliating people... Nathan died [in 2020] while still serving in the army."

**Alison's son Nathan trained at the Army Foundation College, 2016–2017, aged 17.**

# Acknowledgements

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CRIN would like to express our thanks to the veterans and their families who shared their experiences of army training with us, to Konstantinos Tsirlis for statistical advice, and to Walter Busuttil, Katharine Campbell, Arzhia Habibi, and Edgar Jones for their thoughts on an earlier draft.

Illustrations by Miriam Sugranyes.

First published in August 2023.

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# Executive Summary.

A **quarter** of new recruits to the British armed forces are child recruits<sup>1</sup> aged 16 or 17, drawn mainly from deprived neighbourhoods to staff the army,<sup>2</sup> particularly the infantry.<sup>3</sup>

*This report charts the impact of their early enlistment on mental health, with a focus on suicide in male personnel and veterans. (The few reliable statistics for females show a similar pattern.)*

## **Early enlistment is associated with an increased risk of suicide**

The suicide rate among soldiers aged 16–19 is substantially higher than that of their civilian peers:

- Over the last two decades, the suicide risk among male soldiers aged 16–19 has been **one-third** higher than that of their civilian peers<sup>4</sup> and **three times** the armed forces average.<sup>5</sup>
- This risk is concentrated in the **infantry** (Figure 2), where child recruits are over-represented.<sup>6</sup> **More than half** of infanteers who died by suicide in the last two decades had joined up as children (Figure 3);<sup>7</sup> infanteers who had signed up under the age of 18 have had **double** the odds of ending their lives while still in service compared with those who joined as adults.<sup>8</sup>

- Rates of anxiety, depression, and PTSD are also elevated in young personnel, at approximately **double** those found in civilians of the same age (Figure 11).<sup>9 10</sup>

Suicide risk increases after personnel leave ('veterans'). Again, veterans who had signed up as children suffer worse outcomes than those who had joined as adults (Figure 5):<sup>11 12</sup>

- Over the last two decades, veterans aged 16–19 have been **three times** as likely as civilians of the same age to end their lives (Figure 4).<sup>13</sup> A 2009 study found that the risk had been highest of all in army veterans who had joined up at 16.<sup>14</sup>
- Over approximately the last 25 years, veterans who had enlisted as children have also had **double** the odds of alcohol misuse and **double** the odds of reporting self-harm when compared to veterans who had joined up as adults (Figure 7).<sup>15</sup>

### **Young recruits' high rate of suicide is not explained by childhood background alone**

A troubled background is common among child recruits. But while adversity in childhood is known to contribute to mental ill-health in adolescence and adulthood, this alone does not account for the elevated rate of suicide in this group:

- Over the last 25 years or so, veterans who joined up as children have had **between two and three** times the odds of long-term PTSD compared to civilians of the same age and similar childhood background (Figure 7).<sup>16</sup>
- Over a similar period, their rate of suicide has been **three times** that of the most disadvantaged civilians of the same age (Figure 6).<sup>17</sup>

### **Military suicide is most common among those who have never seen war**

Contrary to a common assumption that the main cause of military suicide is traumatic war experiences, the risk tends to be highest among those who have never been deployed.<sup>18</sup> Three factors help to explain why this is so in young personnel and veterans in particular:

1. The heightened vulnerability of the adolescent brain to stress, particularly in recruits with a background of adverse childhood experiences;
2. The impact of early military experiences, particularly the stressful conditions of initial training; and
3. Difficulties readjusting to civilian life after discharge.

These risk factors tend to accumulate along the typical career pathway of a child recruit:

**A. Pre-military factors heighten vulnerability.** A background of adverse childhood experiences amplifies the adolescent brain's reactivity to stressors.<sup>19</sup>

#### **B. Military factors apply stress:**

- Initial training is an intensive resocialisation process – a 'pressure cooker' – which makes routine use of sustained stress. Restrictions on external communications<sup>20</sup> and the right to leave<sup>21</sup> add to the load, as do common experiences of peer bullying,<sup>22</sup> sexual harassment,<sup>23,24</sup> and abuse by staff.<sup>25</sup> The British army's own research found in 2022 that child trainees, particularly girls, experienced an **'erosion of resilience'** (Figure 8).<sup>26</sup>
- Daily stress during initial training divides trainees into a majority **'in-group'** who adapt to its demands and an **'out-group'** who do not.<sup>27</sup> Young veterans and their parents report that out-group recruits are commonly bullied by peers and instructors, leading to low self-worth, emotional numbing, and depression.<sup>28</sup>

**C. Post-military factors compound impact.** Immediately out of work and education, young veterans are socio-economically highly vulnerable. Few have professional mental health support.<sup>29</sup>



## Conclusion: Early enlistment aggravates the risk of suicide and mental ill-health

This report finds a high rate of suicide and associated mental health problems in those who join the British armed forces at a young age, particularly those who enlist under the age of 18. This is best explained by a combination of factors: the impact of childhood stress, stressful military experiences (mostly before personnel are sent to war), and the stresses of transition to civilian life following early discharge.

It is sometimes suggested that, had child recruits not joined up, they would be out of work and education and so suffer still poorer mental health. But today, **four in five** 16-year-olds living in deprivation – the army's main recruitment pool – now continue in full-time education<sup>30</sup> and most of the remainder are in work.<sup>31</sup>

Under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children under age 18 have a legal right to be fully safeguarded from undue harm.<sup>32</sup> In view of the mental health and socio-economic risks of early enlistment, we continue to recommend raising the minimum age for military recruitment in the UK from 16 to 18, in line with most of the rest of the world.<sup>33</sup>

Among the voices calling for this change are those of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child,<sup>34</sup> the Children's Commissioners for each UK nation,<sup>35</sup> health experts<sup>36</sup> and children's rights organisations,<sup>37</sup> and the families harmed by the policy of child enlistment.<sup>38</sup> Polling indicates clear support in the British public for raising the minimum enlistment age to 18.<sup>39</sup>

On the evidence, the change would also mean that fewer young people end their lives.

# 10 **The Pressure Cooker**

Introduction

# Introduction ●

While most states worldwide have made the transition to all-adult armed forces, the UK is unusual in enlisting adolescent children from age 16 and unique in relying so heavily on the age group.<sup>40</sup>

A **quarter** of new soldier recruits are aged under 18,<sup>41</sup> drawn mostly from deprived neighbourhoods.<sup>42</sup>

The effect of early enlistment on mental health has not been well understood. This report draws on official sources and peer-reviewed research to show that the policy of recruiting from age 16 contributes to a heavy mental health burden on child recruits.

We focus on suicidality. While suicide itself is a rare event, elevated suicide rates are also a barometer for stress-related mental health problems, particularly anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).<sup>43</sup>

We show for the first time that early military experiences, before recruits are sent to war, have a deep and disproportionate impact on the mental health of the youngest personnel and veterans.

The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child requires that, in all actions that concern children, their best interests must be made a 'primary consideration'.<sup>44</sup> They have a legal right to be fully safeguarded from any undue harm that may arise from their enlistment for military purposes.

We hope that this report will support that aim.

# 01

Section One

# Youngest most at risk.



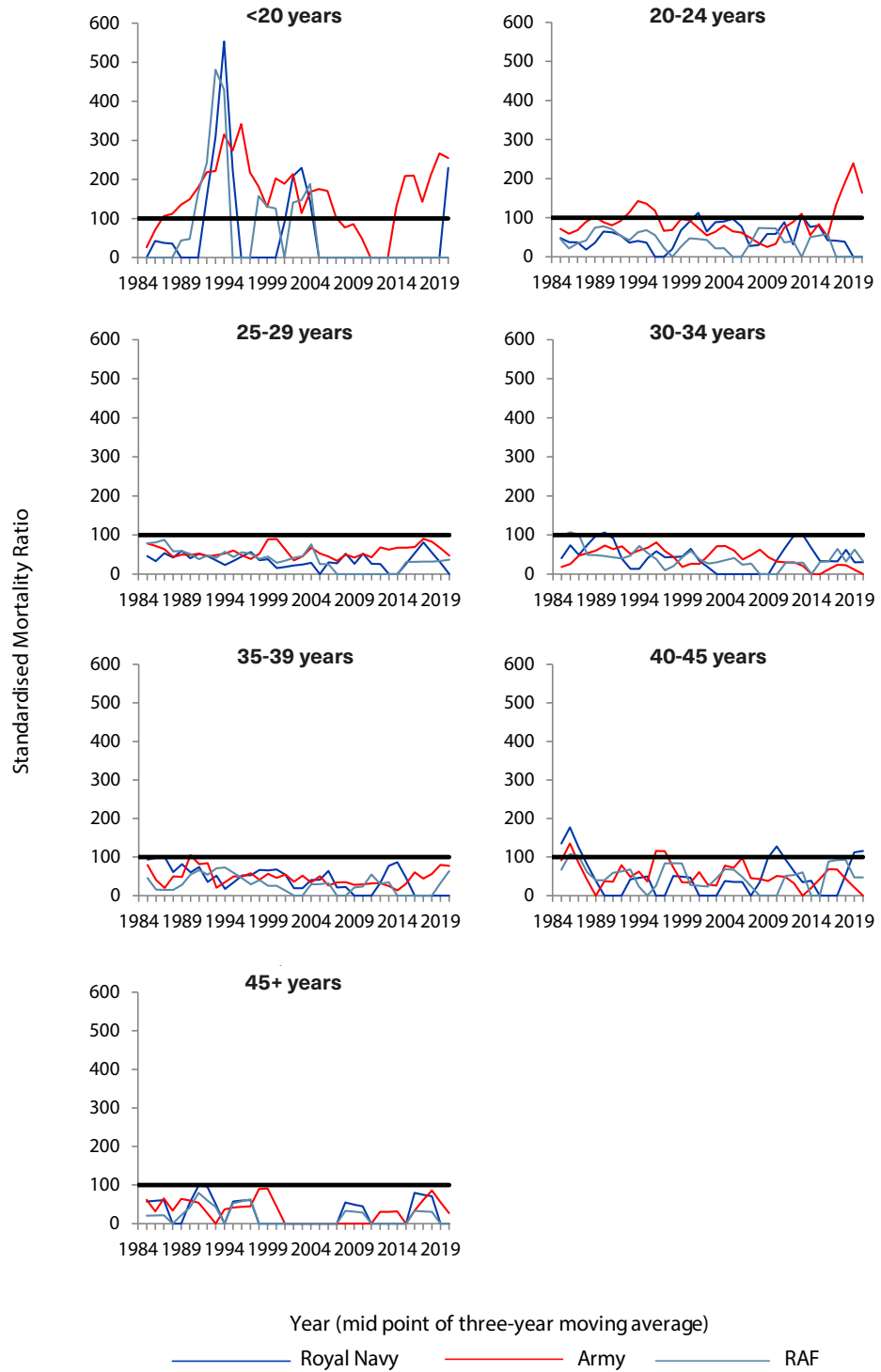
While the risk of suicide among British armed forces personnel is lower than that found in civilian life, this is not so among the youngest soldiers, who are much more likely than their civilian peers to end their lives. The risk is highest of all in child recruits who leave soon after joining.

### 1.1 Youngest Recruits

Over the last 20 years, suicide in the British armed forces has been less common than among civilians of the same age.<sup>45</sup> This is not so for male soldiers aged 16–19, whose risk has been one-third (31%) higher than that of same-age civilians<sup>46</sup> and **three times** the average for the armed forces as a whole.<sup>47</sup>

This high risk is mostly confined to the **army**; the risk to young air force and navy personnel has resembled that faced by civilians of the same age.<sup>48</sup>

Figure 1 shows how high the risk has been for young soldiers. The bold horizontal line in each graph shows the suicide rate in the general population for the same age group; the red line shows the rate in the army. The first graph shows the suicide rate since 2001 in the under-20 age group.



**Figure 1:** Male suicide rates in UK armed forces by age group, year and military branch (1984–2020).<sup>49</sup>

## 1.2 Women and Girls

Since female personnel are a small minority of the armed forces, calculating their suicide rate reliably is not possible.<sup>50</sup> Suicide among female former personnel (i.e. 'veterans') follows a similar pattern to men: overall, the risk is little different from civilian life, but among the youngest it is **between three and four times higher**.<sup>51</sup>

The experience of other countries suggests that, in general, female personnel and veterans are at increased risk relative to their civilian peers, though less is known about the specific risks of younger age groups:

- In the United States, whose armed forces are large enough to calculate a rate of suicide among serving female *personnel*, their risk is approximately **twice** that of civilian women.<sup>52</sup>
- In Australia and Canada, female *veterans* have been around **twice** as likely as their civilian peers to end their lives,<sup>53</sup> and in the United States **three times** as likely.<sup>54</sup>

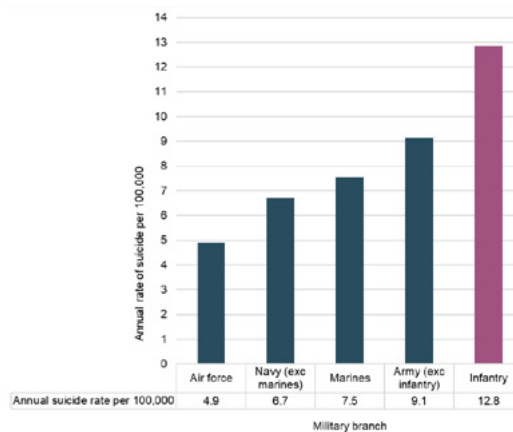
Given the dearth of data on female or transgender military suicide in the UK, the rest of this report focuses on the risk among males.

## 1.3 Infantry

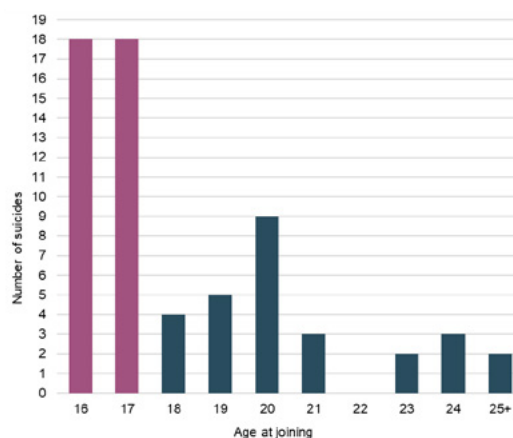
As mentioned, youth suicide risk in the armed forces is concentrated in the army. Within the army, it is concentrated in the **infantry**. These are close-combat troops who make up just over a quarter of army personnel.

The army says that the reason it recruits soldiers from age 16 is 'particularly for the infantry'<sup>55</sup> and child recruits are indeed over-represented among infanters.<sup>56</sup>

Infanteers have a very high suicide risk (Figure 2), which is concentrated in soldiers who signed up as children: over half of infanters who died by suicide in the last two decades joined up under age 18 (Figure 3).<sup>57</sup> Between 2001 and 2020, **infanteers who had joined up under the age of 18 had more than double the odds of in-service suicide compared to those who had joined up as adults** [OR 2.3, 95% CI 1.4-3.7, p=0.001].<sup>58</sup>



**Figure 2.** British armed forces: Male suicide rate among serving personnel, by military branch (2001-2020)<sup>59</sup>



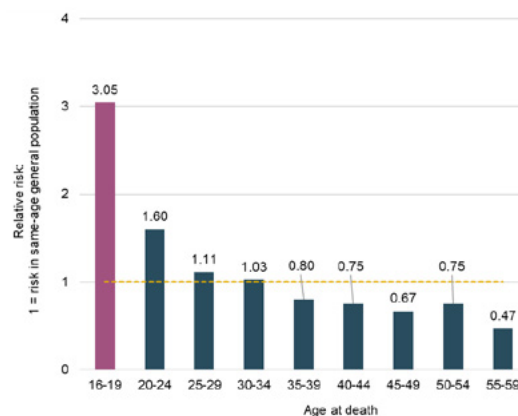
**Figure 3.** British infantry: Suicides by age at joining (2001-2020)<sup>60</sup>

## 1.4 Youngest Veterans

The risk of suicide and other mental health problems increases after personnel leave. In around the last two decades, the youngest veterans – which here means all ex-personnel, whether they have been to war or not – have been **three times** as likely as same-age civilians to end their lives.<sup>61</sup>

Figure 4 presents the findings of the study in question, showing how strongly the risk of veteran suicide is concentrated among the youngest. The dotted line shows the civilian suicide rate for each age group; the purple column shows the rate of suicide in the youngest veterans.

In an earlier study by the same team, **veterans who had both joined up and left at 16 had had the highest suicide risk of all.**<sup>62</sup> Evidently, child recruits who leave service early – which usually means during their initial training – face a markedly elevated risk of suicidality.

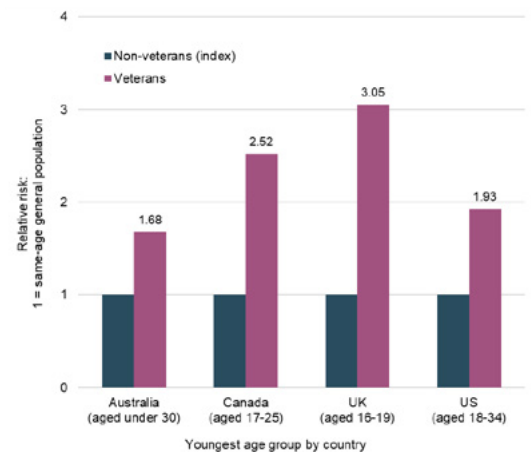


**Figure 4.** Armed forces veterans: relative risk of suicide by age group with comparison to the same-age general population (1996-2018).<sup>63</sup>

## 1.5 International Comparison

A similar pattern is seen in other economically comparable countries that enlist child recruits (Figure 5).<sup>64</sup> As in the UK, so in Australia, Canada, and the United States, the risk is concentrated in the army and especially army veterans.<sup>65 66</sup>

In respect of serving personnel, research in the US found that many more attempted suicides in the US Army were by soldiers in training than by those at war.<sup>67</sup> In respect of veterans, other research in the US found that veterans with less than one year's service – who tend to be those who dropped out of their training – were much more likely than longer-serving veterans to end their lives.<sup>68</sup> As in the UK, so in Canada and the US (though not in Australia), most cases of veteran suicide occur in the few years after discharge.<sup>69</sup>



**Figure 5.** Relative risk of young veteran suicide compared with same-age non-veterans in Australia, Canada, UK and US (males)<sup>70 71 72 73</sup>



# Alison's Story.

## Alison's son Nathan joined the Army Foundation College in 2016, aged 16.

Nathan started his military career at the Army Foundation College Harrogate in 2016. Nathan was a confident, resilient lad who wanted nothing more than to be a soldier. [...] During the first phase of his training Nathan reported serious incidents to me; he told me he was hit, slapped, pushed, kicked and verbally abused by staff. He said he felt humiliated... He knew the training would be tough but this was abuse and the staff were power crazy. [...]

Nathan felt uncomfortable talking about what was happening to him but I often pushed him to open up and talk to me. He did tell me about witnessing abuse of his peers and commented on his dislike and distrust for some of the staff. He did however point out not all staff were abusive but said that none of them could be trusted. He told me all staff knew what was going on but turned a blind eye. [...]

After the initial six weeks of training we travelled to Harrogate for Nathan's first passing out parade and brought him home on leave. He was not the same happy confident lad who started six weeks previously. He started drinking heavily and was very withdrawn. It was very difficult getting him to return to Harrogate and he told me he wanted to leave the army.

When he returned to Harrogate, he rang me to tell me he was handing in his letter to leave. He told me his request was ripped up in his face. He was only 17 years old and devastated at not being able to leave. He repeatedly told me he wanted to be a soldier and expected training to be tough but couldn't cope with the way they were mistreated. He was clearly very frightened for his safety and I shared his fears.

Whenever he was on leave it became increasingly difficult to get him to return to Harrogate. I would take him to the train station and by the time I arrived home Nathan wouldn't be far behind me. He was genuinely very fearful of being at Harrogate and things just got worse... He didn't mind the legitimate punishments, it was the abuse he was scared of.

I spoke to his commanding officers after every occasion and expressed my concerns. Each member of staff basically said the same thing: if Nathan didn't return he would be posted AWOL. I was repeatedly told [incorrectly] that once he had completed the first six weeks he had no way of leaving. They said no matter how he felt he had to complete the four years. [...] The officers told me that if Nathan didn't return then the seriousness of the situation would escalate and the punishments would be more severe. [...] He described the staff as animals that got off on hurting and humiliating people and that Harrogate should be shut down.

Nathan died while still serving in the army.

► Read Alison's testimony in full [online](#).

## 02

## Section Two

# Why are the youngest most at risk?



Against the common assumption that military suicide is mainly caused by traumatic war experiences, the risk is highest among those who have never seen war.

**Youth military suicide in particular is better explained by four other factors, which combine to magnify the risk:**

1. The adolescent brain's heightened vulnerability to stress
2. The troubled background common to young recruits
3. The sustained stresses of early experiences in the military (particularly training)
4. Difficulties readjusting to civilian life after leaving

## 2.1 War is not the reason

Most research on military suicide finds that being sent on deployment – a military operation – does not increase the risk,<sup>74</sup> although certain types of war experiences, such as killing and injuring others, can do so.<sup>75</sup>

In any case, deployment cannot account for the higher risk in child recruits and veterans, who are not sent to war until they turn 18.<sup>76</sup> Conversely, older personnel and veterans are likely to have been deployed several times yet have a suicide risk lower than the civilian average for their age.<sup>77</sup>

The heavy mental health burden carried by young soldiers and veterans even before they have seen war is better understood in terms of the stressful pathway taken by a typical child recruit.

## 2.2 The stressful career path of a child recruit

Every young recruit is an individual, but their experiences tend to bear certain characteristics in common, which combine to drive up the risk of mental ill-health:

- **Stressful pre-military experiences.**  
The army is **twice** as likely to recruit from the poorest local areas as from the richest<sup>78</sup> and much of its intake already carries trauma from childhood.<sup>79</sup>
- **Stressful military experiences.**  
As described below, basic soldier training, particularly for the infantry, makes routine use of sustained stress and abuse is common.
- **Stressful post-military experiences.**  
A large proportion of child recruits drop out of their training, at which point they are immediately out of work and out of education.

When all these risk factors combine, as they frequently do, a picture emerges of a highly precarious recruit pathway. A teenager enlisted for the infantry from a troubled background, who suffers under the high-stress training environment and drops out without much support is likely to suffer mental health problems. The army does not track these discharged child recruits<sup>80</sup> and they are unlikely to have contact with professional mental health services.<sup>81</sup>

## 2.3 Childhood stress and the adolescent brain

### Predisposing factors

The developing adolescent brain is particularly vulnerable to stressors,<sup>82</sup> especially social stressors such as bullying and ostracisation.<sup>83</sup> Prolonged stress becomes toxic to the brain during this period, changing the way it functions and interfering with healthy development.<sup>84</sup>

Notably, sustained stress **sensitises** certain neural circuits.<sup>85</sup> This can lead to anxious hyper-vigilance, for example, or aggressive outbursts, even when no stressors are present.<sup>86</sup> It can also disrupt healthy brain development right into adulthood<sup>87</sup> and induce lasting problems such as anxiety,<sup>88</sup> depression,<sup>89</sup> and substance misuse.<sup>90</sup>

While all of us are vulnerable to stress in our teenage years, susceptibility is aggravated in those whose earlier childhood was itself stressful.<sup>91</sup> Adolescents with experience of abuse or neglect are more likely than others to be temperamentally anxious and depressive,<sup>92</sup> for example, which dramatically adds to the risk of self-harm and suicide.<sup>93</sup>

By relying so heavily on child recruits from deprived neighbourhoods, the army's recruitment strategy results in a high intake of young people already sensitised to stressors:

- Around **half** of young personnel have experienced at least **four** different types of adverse experience as children.<sup>94,95</sup> This degree of traumatic exposure is indicative of lasting sensitisation to stress, as measured by the overproduction of cortisol.<sup>96</sup>
- These young, trauma-experienced personnel are much more likely than others to have problems with **anxiety, depression, alcohol and substance misuse, self-harm, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**.<sup>97</sup> The rates of anxiety, depression, and PTSD among young personnel are approximately **double** those found in the same-age general population (Figure 11).<sup>98,99</sup> All are risk factors for suicidality.

"Part of army training is to break you down, but when you're 16 your brain isn't developed properly... It has a massive effect on your brain... It's only later on that you realise what's been done to you. It's taken years and years to now look back at that damage that's been done and build myself back up."<sup>100</sup>

**Rachel, trained aged under 18.**

### Aggravating factors

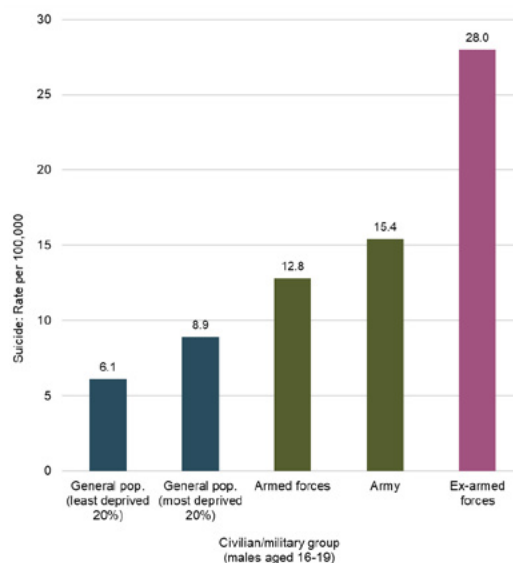
Childhood stress has such a profound impact on later suicidality that it undoubtedly accounts in part for the elevated suicide rates found among young personnel and veterans, irrespective of their military experiences.<sup>101 102</sup>

But the idea that early military experiences add nothing to this burden is untenable. That would be to argue that placing a stress-vulnerable adolescent child under the sustained stress of military training is harmless. All the available statistical evidence points the other way,<sup>103 104</sup> while veterans themselves offer their own compelling testimony that military training left them damaged.<sup>105</sup>

For example, if military enlistment had no harmful impact on trauma-experienced child recruits, they would not suffer greater stress-related mental illness than non-veterans from similar social backgrounds, but they do.

This is clearly shown later in Figure 7B for PTSD and, for suicidality, in Figure 6 below.

**Figure 6.** United Kingdom: male suicide at age 16–19 in the general population by deprivation status (2001–2020), compared with that in army personnel (1984–2021), armed forces personnel (1996–2018), and former armed forces personnel (1996–2018).<sup>106</sup>



Taken together, the available evidence indicates that the mental health burden in adolescent recruits and veterans arises not from the impact of early life stress alone, but also from its aggravation by the stressors of their early military experiences.

As to why early military experiences are so stressful is the question to which we now turn.

## 2.4 The sustained stress of military training

### The pressure cooker

The soldier has a job like no other. On the battlefield, they must run towards danger and kill and injure people, even when their every instinct is to flee. Accordingly, the main aim of basic military training is to inculcate unconditional obedience in recruits. It bears little resemblance to civilian notions of learning.<sup>107</sup>

To meet the unique demands of their role, new recruits must be coercively re-socialised. According to US military officers:

‘Intense indoctrination will be necessary to enable service members to engage in behaviours that represent a more radical departure from their prior experiences and worldview... (1) killing someone else in the service of a mission to protect one’s country, and (2) the willingness to subordinate self-interests, including survival, in the service of group goals.’<sup>108</sup>

The training environment is a pressure cooker; the military organisation subjects new recruits to continuous stress from their first day. The British army, for example, makes use of the following strategies to condition recruits for obedience:

- **Capture.** Child recruits to the army have no legal right to leave in the first six weeks.<sup>109</sup>
- **Suppression.** Uniforms and a ban on first names suppress the individual personality.
- **Isolation.** Strict limitations on contact with friends and family remove external sources of social support; in the first six weeks, child recruits are forbidden to host visitors or to leave the base to go into town, and they may only make one short phone call each evening (mobiles are confiscated on arrival).<sup>110</sup>
- **Disorientation.** Recruits are kept in the dark about what will happen, when, and why. They have no idea what is expected of them other than to do exactly what they are told.
- **Depletion.** Sleep deprivation and physical exhaustion deplete recruits' capacity to resist the conditioning process; and
- **Inducement.** Obedience is conditioned by rewarding conformity and punishing failure with humiliation.<sup>111</sup>

An example of a conditioning technique is the humiliation of a recruit in front of their peers for not folding their clothes in precisely the way they have been told. While folding clothes is irrelevant to warfare, the repeating demand that every task be performed in exactly the way prescribed gradually induces recruits to follow any and every order without a second thought.<sup>112</sup>

## Mental health effects

Such coercive resocialisation would be unlawful in any civilian setting for any age group, yet this is how armies worldwide train their soldiers.<sup>113</sup> The relatively little available research indicates a clear impact on mental health. A study of the US army, for instance, found that soldiers in training were **four times** as likely to attempt suicide as those on a first deployment (Figure 9 in Appendix A).<sup>114 115</sup>

No comparable study has been carried out in the UK, but the British army's own research in 2022 found that its child recruits specifically experienced an '**erosion of resilience**' during initial training, as well as **reduced self-belief** and **increased difficulties managing emotions** (Figure 8 in Appendix A).<sup>116</sup>

'In the female group there was a significant decrease in resilience, self-efficacy, emotional clarity, the ability to control impulses when distressed, and access to emotional regulation strategies after the training period. In the male control group there was a significant decrease in their reported ability to bounce back, [gain] access to emotional regulation strategies, and their overall emotional regulation scores after the training period.'<sup>117</sup>

These findings are consistent with the known effects of sustained stress on the adolescent brain.

"Bayonet training is teaching you to kill a person with a blade on the end of a rifle. You'll be put through loads of physical punishments – you're crawling through mud, screamed at and shouted at, kicked, punched while you're on the floor, anything to get you angry – they want you to release this insane amount of aggression, enough to stab another man when they say, basically, on the flick of a switch... Every single person I spoke to since leaving the army has been affected."

**Wayne, infantry, trained aged 17, 2006<sup>118</sup>**



"Unbeknown to me at the time, [the army's] training and/or indoctrination would come to shape my life, my decisions and my neurological processes for years to come... I suppose at the time we took it all in our stride and laughed it off. But we as people and in particular our brains were being prepared for the inhuman rigours and demands of traditional war fighting, closing with and engaging the enemy and by extension modern international conflicts."

**Ryan, British infantry, 2000-2008<sup>119</sup>**

## Army Training For Child Recruits: A Culture Of Abuse ●

Listed below is some of the verifiable evidence of serial abuse at the training centre for British army recruits aged 16–17½, the **Army Foundation College (AFC)**.

Between 2014 and February 2023, AFC recorded **72** formal complaints of violence against recruits by staff, including assault and battery.<sup>120</sup>

Speaking to CRIN, parents of three recruits at AFC have described routine maltreatment by staff in some detail.<sup>121</sup> Their children had been punched, slapped, kicked, routinely called the c-word and the f-word, and encouraged to fight one another, for example. Recruits' attempts to exercise their right to leave had been intentionally obstructed. The parents also testified to the traumatic effects of the abuse on their children, which included suicidal ideation and attempted suicide.<sup>122</sup>

Joe joined AFC at 16 in autumn 2013. He has since described how staff:

- routinely assaulted recruits including him;
- related a detailed sexual fantasy of the rape of his girlfriend in order to induce extreme aggression in him;
- ordered him to strip to his underwear while a corporal ridiculed his body at length;
- laughed at him on several occasions when he was in evident distress; and
- repeatedly told recruits who asked for help to 'piss off' and 'shut the f\*\*\* up'.<sup>123</sup>

In Joe's year, **17** AFC instructors were accused of abusing recruits in one of the very few cases that has gone to trial.<sup>124</sup> Among the allegations were that instructors had kicked and punched recruits, held their heads underwater, and

pushed sheep dung into their mouths, but Service Police mishandled the case and it collapsed.<sup>125</sup> When the case was reviewed, it was found that in addition to the recruits who had raised a complaint, many other maltreated recruits had not.<sup>126</sup>

Evidence of **sexual harassment and assault** adds to this disturbing picture:

Across the armed forces, girls aged 16 or 17 are **twice** as likely as civilian girls of the same age to report a sexual assault or rape to the police.<sup>127 128</sup> In 2021, **one in every eight** girls under 18 were victims of sexual offences, according to MoD records of police investigations; girls were **ten** times as likely as adult female personnel to be victimised in this way.<sup>129</sup>

Half of all girls who join the armed forces are enrolled for training at AFC.<sup>130</sup> In 2021, 22 recruits at AFC were victims of sexual offences; three suspects were members of staff.<sup>131</sup> The following year, an instructor was charged with five counts of sexual assault of 16-year-old female recruits.<sup>132</sup>

AFC's own survey of female recruits in 2020 found that **half** had experienced bullying, harassment, or discrimination while training; fewer than a **third** said they would report such behaviour.<sup>133</sup>

Despite an evidenced culture of abuse persisting for at least a decade at the army's dedicated training centre for child recruits, AFC has held an Outstanding Ofsted grade for welfare throughout.<sup>134 135</sup> Ofsted has not reported the evidence of abuse, the very high trainee drop-out rate, or the legally enforced restrictions on recruits' right to leave.<sup>136</sup>

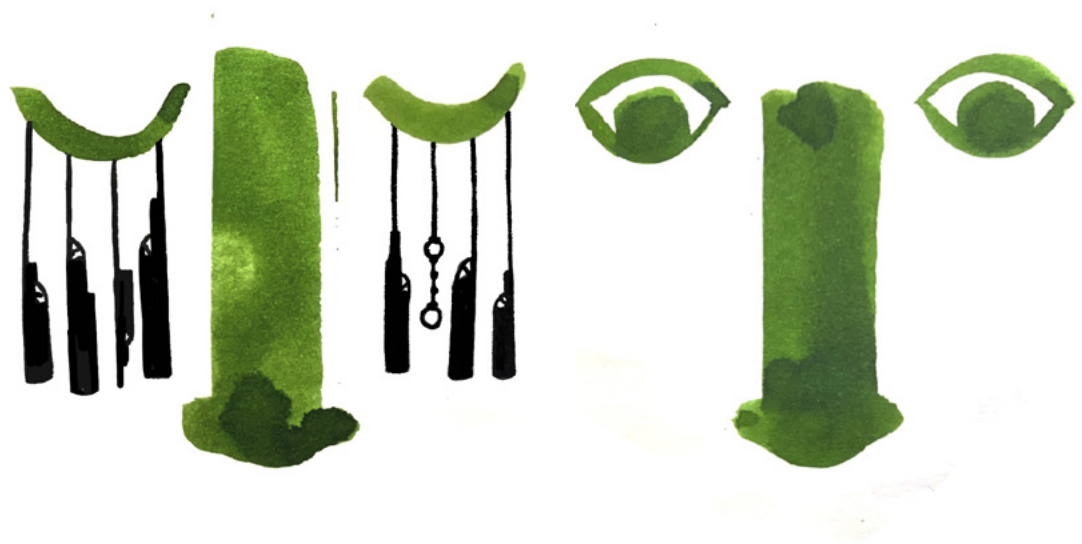
### Weeding out

From the day the child recruit arrives to train, stress is piled onto them. Recruits are disoriented, ordered around, and punished for mistakes. Some begin to bully others, so do some of the staff. For six weeks, denied the right to leave and mostly cut off from friends and family, and with little private space, the child recruit has no way to remove themselves from harm's way.

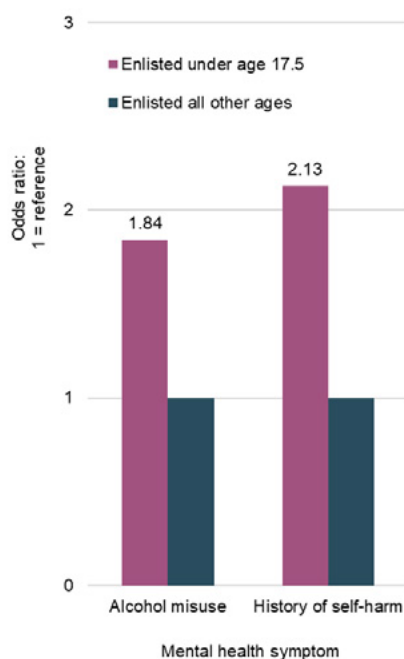
The cumulative psychological load splits trainees into a majority **'in-group'**, who fall into line, and an **'out-group'**, a large minority who either resist the new demands or cannot keep up with them.<sup>137</sup> While some in the in-group may thrive – and may be selected to provide testimonials for recruitment videos – the out-group suffers out of sight.

These pariah recruits bear the brunt of bullying by peers and staff. Young veterans and their parents have described daily experiences of social rejection, leading to low self-worth, emotional numbing, depression, despair, and/or suicidality.<sup>138</sup> The ostracised child recruit is likely to leave when they can or get thrown out as unwanted – a **third** of the army's child recruits never reach the end of their training.<sup>139</sup>

As the stresses of military training 'weed out' the unwanted, those young recruits prone to suicide become young veterans prone to suicide, and largely overlooked. Military suicide statistics in the UK are still calculated on the deaths of serving personnel alone.<sup>140</sup>

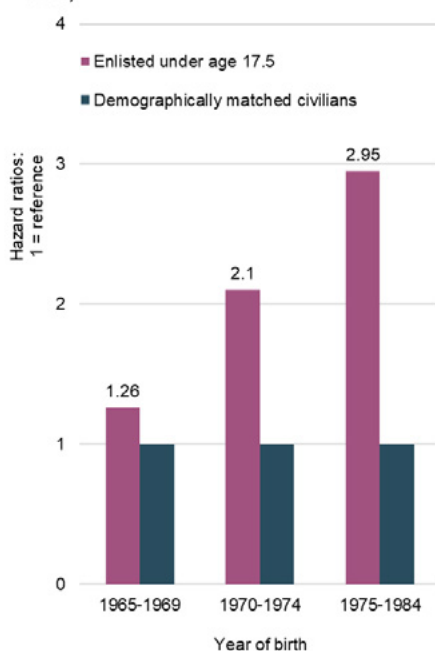


A. UK: Alcohol misuse and self-harm in veterans enlisted under age 17.5 versus other veterans (beginning adult service 2003-2013)



**Figure 7.** Prevalence of mental health problems in veterans who joined the UK armed forces under age 17.5 versus A) other veterans, and B) civilians matched for age and socioeconomic background.<sup>148</sup>

B. Scotland: Posttraumatic stress disorder in veterans enlisted aged under 17.5 years versus demographically matched civilians, by year of birth (1965-1984)



## 2.5. The young veteran's predicament

The youngest veterans emerge from the armed forces with the stigma of rejection to face a precarious future. Not long ago they were in full-time education – most of their peers will still be there – and now they are 'NEET': not in employment, education, or training. Options for returning to education are now few, prospects for gainful employment uncertain.

A 2012 study found that nearly a **half** of veterans (all ages) who left the forces soon after joining had anxiety and/or depression.<sup>141</sup> A **fifth** had PTSD,<sup>142</sup> five times the rate found in the non-veteran population.<sup>143</sup> An earlier study found that **twice** as many veterans who left the forces soon after joining had suicidal thoughts when compared to those who had longer careers.<sup>144</sup>

As noted earlier in Figure 4, veterans who joined up as children over the last two decades have been **three times** as likely as non-veterans of the same age to end their lives.<sup>145</sup> Over a similar period, they have also had **between two and three** times the odds of long-term PTSD compared to same-age civilians from matched social backgrounds,<sup>146</sup> and **double** the risk of alcohol misuse and of episodes of self-harm when compared with recruits who joined up older.<sup>147</sup> This clearly disproportionate psychiatric burden is shown in Figure 7; the purple columns represent veterans who joined at the youngest ages.

# Charlotte's Story.

## Charlotte's son Marc joined the Army Foundation College in 2016, aged 16.

[...] Just before he turned 16, Marc had a recruiting day at school for the army. He came home that evening elated and full of enthusiasm to sign up. My husband and I tried to convince Marc to get a trade or to join the army later in a skilled role, but he wanted to join up as soon as possible. He was full of thoughts of seeing the world, of travel, independence and high wages. [...]

We took him to an open day at the Army Foundation College in Harrogate. All the staff were charming and made Marc feel like all his dreams could come true... Regrettably, I signed Marc up on that day...

After Marc turned 17, he came home for a week or two, and it was during this time that I realised all was not well at Harrogate. I overheard several conversations with his fellow recruits discussing 'bathroom beatings' and 'things going too far'. Marc also let slip he had been in several pubs, bars and clubs in Leeds, and was actively encouraged to attend strip clubs by the staff members in charge of his group.

Marc struggles to talk about what happened at Harrogate... but we know that staff bullied and abused the young recruits, as well as encouraging fighting amongst peers... He and his fellow soldiers often reported feeling very low, but this was ignored by the staff.

Marc is a completely different person since his time at Harrogate. He has attempted suicide and his mental health is permanently damaged. He also sustained injuries while in army training which may turn out to be life-changing. Marc had to go AWOL [Absent Without Leave] from the army, and was only discharged on mental health grounds after a long fight, just over one year ago.

I strongly believe that the Army Foundation College does not look after children's mental health or well-being. It is an outdated institution where bullies thrive, and adults seek pleasure in seeing children broken... I am amazed the place is still allowed to ruin children's lives. They govern themselves and the children are far too scared to speak up.

The adverts and the so-called 'reality TV' program which was aired on Harrogate are completely fake and promise a life which few young people can resist [but] institutionalised bullying and abuse of children is very much happening today... I hope and long for this to change.

► Read Charlotte's testimony in full [online](#).

## 03

## Section Three

# Early enlistment: an opportunity or a cause of harm?



## A rights perspective

So far, we have focused on the precarious path of a 16-year-old army recruit who drops out of training, noting that their suicide risk at this point is **three** times that of a non-veteran of the same age. To account for this, we have charted the recruit's heightened vulnerability to stress due to their age and background, followed by their sustained exposure to stress during and after their time in the military.

All children, including those in adolescence, have a legal right to be safeguarded from undue harm, be it caused by sustained stress, mental coercion, or onerous legal obligations, all of which follow military enlistment.<sup>149</sup> For these and related reasons, experts in adolescent health and development have repeatedly called for the enlistment age to be raised to 18.<sup>150</sup> The neuroscientist Katharine Campbell writes:

**"In the face of overwhelming evidence that childhood adversity, up to and including adolescence, renders young people especially vulnerable to long-term alterations in brain structure and function, culminating in mental health problems and increased risk for suicide, it is particularly disturbing that the minimum age of enlistment into the British armed forces continues to be 16 years."**<sup>151</sup>

The Trades Union Congress has argued that initial military training constitutes 'hazardous work' as defined and banned by the Child Labour Convention,<sup>152</sup> and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has said that all military work is incompatible with international children's rights law and should be reserved for adulthood.<sup>153</sup> The Children's Commissioners for the UK have said the same.<sup>154</sup>

## The narrative of opportunity: a response

An alternative narrative of child enlistment from age 16 is that it offers a secure route out of unemployment for young people from deprived backgrounds. Ministers have suggested that raising the enlistment age to 18 would deny young people this opportunity.<sup>155</sup>

30 years ago, this argument might have held weight, since most young people joined the jobs market straight from school. Today, **four in five** (81%) young people from a background of deprivation, who form the army's primary recruitment demographic, now continue in full-time education after age 16 to enhance their grades and thus their lifetime employment prospects (Figure 10 in Appendix A).<sup>156</sup> Most of the remaining fifth of deprived 16 year-olds are in full-time work.<sup>157</sup> By continuing to enlist from 16, the armed forces are now much more likely to be drawing young people out of full-time education than saving from unemployment.

The position of those who do enlist at 16 is highly insecure. At 16, an army recruit is much more likely to drop out of their training than a civilian is to drop out of a local college.<sup>158</sup> As noted earlier, each year around **600** young recruits leave the army after a few months, or are dismissed as unwanted, at which point they face immediate and potentially lasting precarity.<sup>159</sup>

Despite the army's description of the Army Foundation College as 'effectively a school',<sup>160</sup> the accredited education available to most recruits consists of short, sub-GCSE courses amounting to less than one day per week, as described in our [briefing](#). Ofsted does not examine the suitability of the courses offered and discourages comparison with a school:

**"AFC Harrogate is not a civilian sixth-form or further education college, despite the inclusion of "college" in its title. It is an army initial training establishment, and we inspect it as such."**<sup>161</sup>

The legally binding obligations imposed on recruits also undermine their agency. A child recruited to the army has no right to leave in the first six weeks; if they try, the law still allows the army to impose a custodial sentence.<sup>162 163</sup> A restricted right to leave at written notice is then available, but from age 18 recruits are automatically locked into the army until they turn 22.<sup>164</sup> These terms could not be imposed on any civilian of any age in any kind of work or education, with or without their consent.

In summary, the enlistment of children from age 16 poorly resembles an opportunity, insofar as the word implies a promising path freely chosen. To the contrary, the policy tends to draw young people out of full-time education, offers only rudimentary accredited education when compared to a civilian college, and prevents them from leaving for an extended period. The large number who leave in their discharge window or are dismissed by the army carry a markedly elevated risk of mental illness and few prospects for returning to full-time education or finding work.



# Joe's Story.

## Joe joined the Army Foundation College in 2013, aged 16.

### The following is a short excerpt from his longer testimony, which describes a year of abuse.

One corporal is ok, all the rest are cold and uncaring, or worse. They can see we're new and we're scared, but if you ask for help, it's 'Piss off, you,' or 'Shut the f\*\*\* up.' [...] A decent person would try to talk to you, 'How are we feeling, gents – yeah, it's hard isn't it, right?' But not these guys. I'd say the staff at Harrogate fall into three categories. The first is psychopathic. The second is just cold. The third is the good guy who's being tough for show.

And some of them are just foul, like this one physical training instructor who's an animal to us. First time we meet him, he puts us all in the press-up position apart from this one kid he doesn't like. He makes that kid say, 'Raise, lower, raise, lower...' It's to turn us against that recruit, make us resent him. The corporal knows that when we're all back together and the lights are turned off, things will happen, and they do, and they encourage that, the corporals. [...]

Another time, they announce a tattoo check. We're ordered to strip to our underwear and stand on the line, then to pull up our pants so they can see everything but our genitals. The corporal walks down the line bantering with those he likes and then he comes to me. And he tells me, as I'm almost naked, what he thinks of my body. He starts from my head and he goes down, and he laughs. He just makes fun of my body in front of the entire platoon. What a man. [...]

This isn't the public image of [AFC] Harrogate, of course, because they fake that. One time, some visitors have arrived and the corporals make us wait by the obstacle course until

these guests come round the corner. Then we're all told to work like a team to impress them. It's a stunt. We're not being thrashed that day, of course – if civilians or TV cameras come into an army camp, you'll have the best food of your life and you'll get a completely different experience from normal. It's all a performance, though. Like when we're told to fill out a survey about our experience of training and there's a question about whether I feel safe and I've answered 'No', but the company sergeant major is watching – he comes to read my screen and I change my answer and he walks away...

Apparently, Ofsted talk to recruits, but if they'd asked me, I wouldn't have told them the truth – because the people I'd be talking about literally have the power to put me in prison. The truth is that the friends I met in that place were broken by it. It gave them PTSD, and me as well. Harrogate is dangerous but a recruit can't just say that to a visitor – it's too risky.

I'd have gone home – I wanted to – but in the first six weeks you don't have a right of discharge. This 'college' can literally put you in prison if you leave it – we're not students, we're soldiers. Even leaving the camp gets you arrested. [Note: any recruit who tries to leave in the first six weeks is charged as Absent Without Leave and arrested; later in Joe's testimony, a Sergeant-Major threatens him with prison if he tries to leave.] And at the end of the six weeks, we're all told that our right of discharge has come to an end, which is actually the opposite of the truth. [...] And bullying is everywhere.

For the few who come out reinvented, great, but it's a tiny minority, absolutely tiny. Of the rest, some quit, some just get on with it, and some are left traumatised. It's a very dangerous policy [enlistment at age 16] because you're attracting all kinds of people who don't want to be there, and they're leaving more damaged than when they went in. That's exactly what happened to me and most of my friends.

► Read Joe's testimony in full [online](#).

# Conclusion and Recommendations ●

This report began by showing that military suicide in the UK is concentrated among those who enlist into the army under the age of 18, and particularly among those who drop out of initial training.

It then showed that child recruits are particularly stress prone due to their adolescence and a common background of childhood trauma; and that their early military experiences – well before they may be sent to war – can also be highly stressful. In summary:

- Adolescent young people from troubled backgrounds with heightened susceptibility to stress are sought by the army for basic combat roles.
- They then undergo a continuously stressful process of military reconditioning (and often abuse) designed to induce obedience and ‘weed out’ unsuitable recruits.
- While most child recruits pass out of training, a large proportion drop out with stress-related mental health problems, carrying multiple major risk factors for suicidality.
- Overall, the impact of early life stress, stressful military experiences, and then the stresses of transition to civilian life with little social support and poor socioeconomic prospects, result in a high mental health burden for these young people.

Finally, the report set out why common arguments in favour of enlisting under the age of 18 lack evidence and coherence. While some child recruits may benefit from enlisting early, the overwhelming evidence shows that the policy is harmful to mental health and socio-economic prospects in the long term.

We believe that this report adds to the strong public health and children’s rights case for reserving military work for adulthood. In view of the evidence presented here, raising the enlistment age to 18 would lead to improved mental health outcomes for the 2,000+ or so 16- and 17-year-olds who are now enlisted every year.

Raising the enlistment age to 18 would not deny anyone the option of a military career path, only defer it. Most of today’s adolescent recruits would not be unemployed but in full-time education like almost all other young people, including those from deprived backgrounds. The option of joining up would remain open to them when they reached adulthood, psychologically and physically more robust and better able to make an informed choice in their own interests. This is the norm in most of the rest of the world.

## **We have a single recommendation to make:**

1. In the mental health and socio-economic interests of young people, **raise the minimum age for enlistment into the UK armed forces to 18.**

The change would honour the strong recommendation of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child,<sup>165</sup> which enjoys the support of the Children's Commissioners for each nation of the UK,<sup>166</sup> numerous health experts<sup>167</sup> and children's rights organisations,<sup>168</sup> the public (as represented by polling),<sup>169</sup> and the families traumatised by their experience of child enlistment.<sup>170</sup>

As we have argued elsewhere, the transition to all-adult armed forces would bring operational and economic benefits to the armed forces.<sup>171</sup>

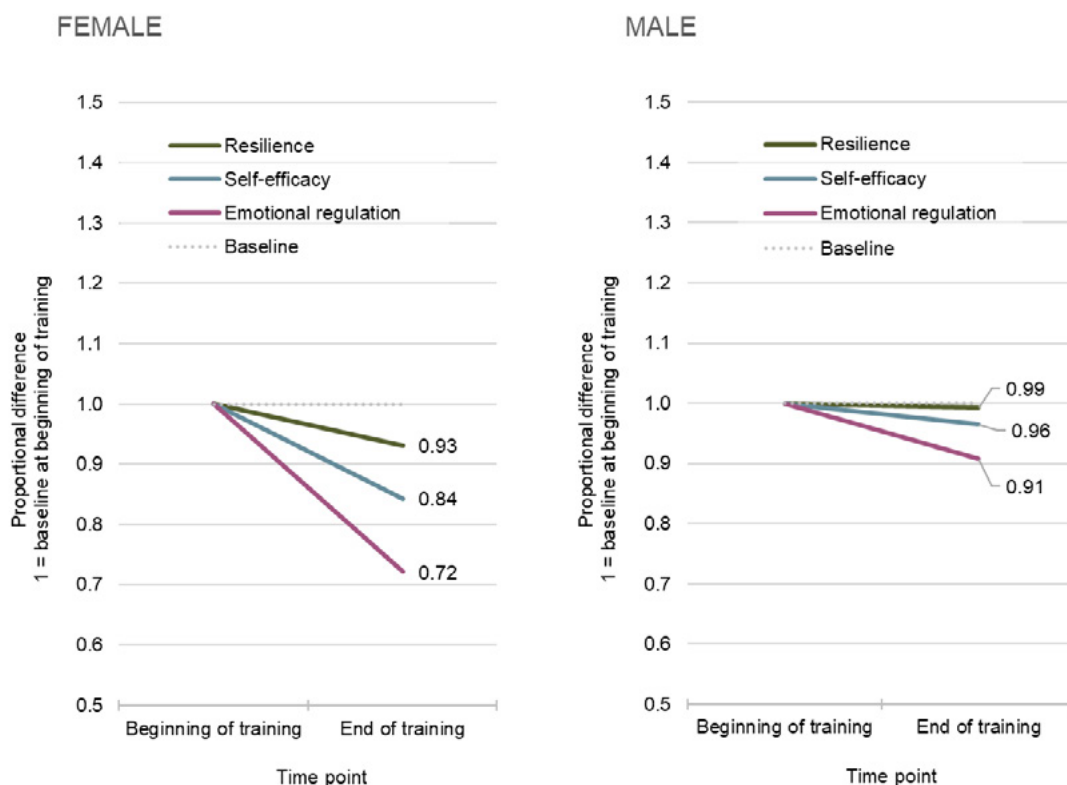
On the evidence, it would also mean that fewer young people end their lives.

# Appendix A: further figures

## The figures below show:

- The impact of initial military training on the resilience of child recruits at the Army Foundation College (Figure 8);
- The high rate of attempted suicide in US army training relative to the rate seen during or after a first deployment to a war zone (Figure 9);
- The steadily increasing proportion of 16- and 17-year-olds continuing in full-time education and work-based learning in England (Figure 10);
- The high prevalence of anxiety and depression in the armed forces compared to working civilians, particularly in the younger age group (Figure 11); and
- The elevated rate of sexual violence against girls aged under 18 in the armed forces, as measured by formal complaints made (Figure 12).

**Figure 8.** British army recruits aged 16-17½: resilience, self-efficacy, and emotional regulation before and after initial military training (2021-22)<sup>172</sup>.



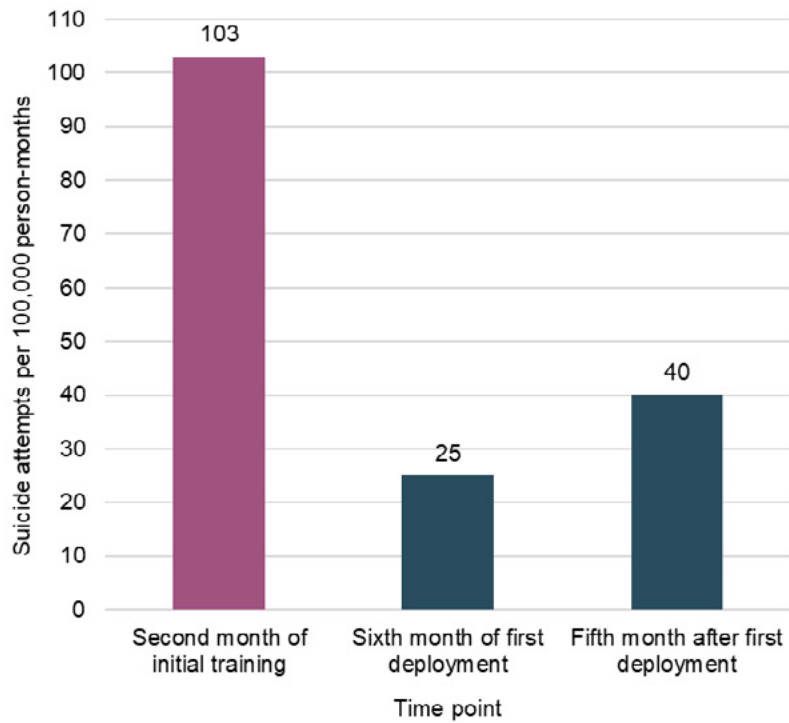


Figure 9. US army: rate of suicide attempts at three peak-risk points in early military career (2004–2009)<sup>173</sup>

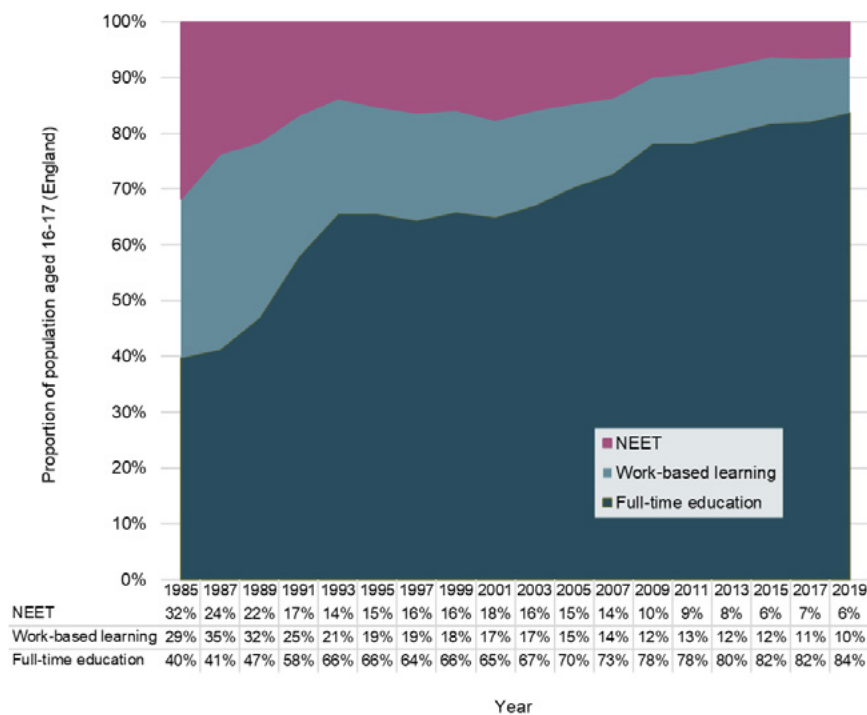
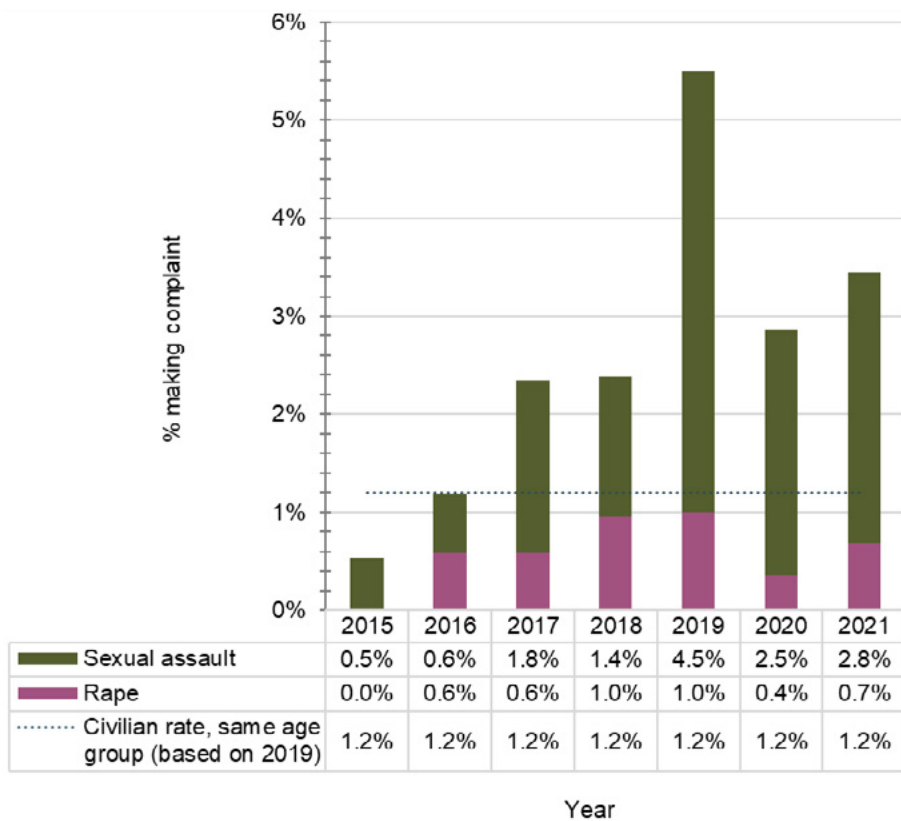


Figure 10. 16 and 17 year olds continuing in full-time education, work-based learning, and not in education, employment or training (NEET) (England, 1985-2019)<sup>174</sup>

**Figure 11.** Prevalence of common mental disorders (anxiety/ depression) in the UK armed forces and the working population, by age group (2004–2009)<sup>175</sup>



**Figure 12.** Armed forces: complaints of rape and sexual assault made to service police by girls aged under 18, with civilian comparison for the same age group, rate by year (2015-2021)<sup>176</sup>



## Appendix B: data tables .

Military branch/arm	Average number of male personnel <sup>177</sup>	Confirmed suicides <sup>178</sup>	Average suicides per year	Crude annual suicide rate per 100,000 personnel
<b>ARMY</b>	<b>91,186</b>	<b>185</b>	<b>9.3</b>	<b>10.1</b>
<i>Infantry</i>	24,933	64	3.2	12.8
<i>Exc. Infantry</i>	66,253	121	6.1	9.1
<b>NAVY</b>	<b>33,422</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>2.3</b>	<b>6.9</b>
<i>Marines</i>	6,628	10	0.5	7.5
<i>Exc. Marines</i>	26,794	36	1.8	6.7
<b>AIR FORCE</b>	<b>36,791</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>1.8</b>	<b>4.9</b>

Data for figure 2 – suicides among British armed forces personnel, by military branch (males, 2001–2020).

Age at entry	Intake <sup>179</sup> (missing data 2005/06 - 2006/07)	Estimated intake adjusted for missing data <sup>180</sup>	Suicides <sup>181</sup>	Odds ratio
16-17	25,075	28,561	36	2.3 (95% CI 1.4-3.7 <i>p</i> = 0.0013)
18+	45,320	50,356	28	1 (reference)
<i>Other Ranks</i>	42,686	47,429		
<i>Officer Cadets</i> <sup>182</sup>	2,634	2,927		

British infantry, 2001–2020: odds of in-service suicide by age at enlistment

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## Executive Summary (1-39)

- For example, between 2017–18 and 2021–22, 27% of the army's enlisted intake was aged under 18. MoD, *UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics: April 2022* (Data tables), 2022a, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/uk-armed-forces-biannual-diversity-statistics-april-2022>, Table 9.
- C Cooper, D Gee, 'Youngest British army recruits come disproportionately from England's most deprived constituencies', 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/yx8osqhz>; Oxford Economics, *The wider value of the British army*, 2021, p. 36, <https://www.oxfordeconomics.com/publication/open/352676>.
- In the five-year period between 2016–17 and 2020–21, 10,140 army enlistees were aged under 18, of whom 3,898 (38%) were in the infantry, and 29,160 enlistees were aged 18 and above, of whom 8,710 (30%) were in the infantry. Calculated from information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, 22 September 2021, ref. FOI2021/10665, [https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/infantry\\_enlistment](https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/infantry_enlistment), and MoD, *UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics: April 2021* (Data tables), 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/uk-armed-forces-biannual-diversity-statistics-2021>, Table 9A.
- Between 2001 and 2020, the suicide rate in army personnel aged 16–19 was 31% higher than that found in the same-age general population. MoD, 'UK armed forces suicides: 1984 to 2021 data tables', 2022b, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1063681/UK\\_armed\\_forces\\_suicides\\_and\\_open\\_verdict\\_deaths\\_2021.xlsx](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1063681/UK_armed_forces_suicides_and_open_verdict_deaths_2021.xlsx).
- Between 2002 and 2021, the standardised mortality ratio for suicide among soldiers aged 16–19 in the UK was 131 (i.e. a 31% increased risk relative to the same-age general population) and 43 in the armed forces as a whole (i.e. a 57% reduced risk relative to the same-age general population), a threefold difference. *Ibid.*, see Additional Table 4.
- See endnote 3.
- Information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, ref. ArmyPolSec/D/N/FOI2022/12210, 14 November 2022, [https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/suicides\\_in\\_the\\_infantry#incoming-2165712](https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/suicides_in_the_infantry#incoming-2165712).
- See Table 2 in *Appendix B: Data tables* for figures and sources.
- Anxiety/depression in personnel under age 25 and same-age working civilians: 22% vs. 11%. 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?' *Psychol Med*, 2015, **45**(9), pp. 1881–91. doi:10.1017/S0033291714002980.
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- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 'Serving and ex-serving Australian Defence Force members who have served since 1985: suicide monitoring 2001 to 2019', 2021, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/c0338ed6-a0da-4f5a-b503-41abde024230/aihw-phe-290.pdf.aspx>, Table 5; Department of National Defence (Canada), '2021 Report on Suicide Mortality in the Canadian Armed Forces (1995 to 2020)', 2022, <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/dnd-mdn/documents/health/2021-report-suicide-mortality-in-caf-1995-to-2020.pdf>, Figure 1; Department of Defense (Defense Suicide Prevention Office, US), *Annual suicide report, 2020*, <https://www.dsps.mil/Portals/113/Documents/CY20%20Suicide%20Report/CY%202020%20Annual%20Suicide%20Report.pdf>, Table 2; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 'Changes in suicide rate: United States, 2019 and 2020', 2022, [https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/71/wr/mm7108a5.htm#T1\\_down](https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/71/wr/mm7108a5.htm#T1_down), Table 1.
- In the US, for example, the suicide rate for active personnel aged 17–19 in 2020 was 36% higher than that found in a similar age group in the general population. Specifically, the suicide rate among US active-component (cf. 'regulars' in UK) personnel aged 17–19 was 30 per 100,000 and the rate in the male general population aged 15–24 was 22 per 100,000. Department of Defense, 2020, *op cit.*, Table 2; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *op cit.*, Table 1.
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19. K Campbell, 'The neurobiology of childhood trauma, from early physical pain onwards: as relevant as ever in today's fractured world', *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 2022a, 13(2), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/20008066.2022.2131969>.
  20. During the first six weeks, recruits are allowed 'controlled access' to their mobile phones for a 40-60 minute period between 8pm and 10pm; the rest of the time it is kept in a sergeant's office. 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.
  21. Under-18s have no legal 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).
  22. Cited in Child Rights International Network (CRIN), 'Parents of under-18 recruits speak out about abuse at army training centre', 2021a, <https://home.crin.org/readlistenwatch/stories/army-abuse-testimonies>.
  23. Across the armed forces in 2021, one in eight girls under 18 were victims of a sexual offence, according to MoD records of police investigations; girls were ten times as likely as adult female personnel to be victimised in this way. Specifically, 37 girls were victims in sexual offence cases opened by the Service Police, out of a total population of 290 girls serving in the armed forces; a rate of 12.8%. In the same year, 202 adult female personnel were victims of sexual offence cases, out of a population of 16,180; a rate of 1.2%. Leo Docherty MP, 'Armed Forces: Offences against Children', 26 April 2022 (2022a), <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2022-04-14/154396>; MoD, *Sexual Offences in the Service Justice System 2021 Annual Statistics* [Worksheet 3], 31 March 2022d, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1064458/Murder\\_Manslaughter\\_Sexual\\_Offences\\_Supplementary\\_Tables.xls](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1064458/Murder_Manslaughter_Sexual_Offences_Supplementary_Tables.xls); MoD, *UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics: 1 April 2021* [Tables 1 and 3], 10 June 2021, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1012586/Biannual\\_Diversity\\_Tables\\_Apr21.xlsx](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1012586/Biannual_Diversity_Tables_Apr21.xlsx).
  24. An anonymous survey of girls at the Army Foundation College in 2020 found that half (48%) had experienced bullying, harassment or discrimination while training there and 30% said they would report it. Army Foundation College Harrogate, *Project Athena: A pilot training to optimise basic training for female junior soldiers*, 2022, p. 5, <https://home.crin.org/s/Pj-ATHENA-Report.pdf>.
  25. Between 2014 and February 2023, AFC recorded 72 formal complaints of violence against recruits by staff, including assault and battery. At least 13 of these cases were proven following investigation. Leo Docherty MP, 2022a, op cit., and 19 May 2022 (2022b), <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2022-05-16/2317>. Information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, ref. Army/Sec/C/U/FOI2021/13445, 30 November 2021, [https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/alleged\\_abuse\\_at\\_army\\_foundation](https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/alleged_abuse_at_army_foundation) and ref. Army/Sec/C/U/FOI2021/15645, 11 January 2022, [https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/abuse\\_at\\_army\\_foundation\\_college](https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/abuse_at_army_foundation_college) and ref. Army/Sec/U/A/FOI2023/02395, 23 March 2023, [https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/army\\_foundation\\_college\\_complain#incoming-2268883](https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/army_foundation_college_complain#incoming-2268883); Johnny Mercer MP, 'Army: Young people - no. 109376', 4 November 2020, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2020-10-30/109376>.
  26. Army Foundation College Harrogate, 2022, op cit., pp. 28, 38.
  27. For examples, see D Gee, *The First Ambush? Effects of army training and employment* (London: Veterans for Peace, 2017), [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318128786\\_The\\_First\\_Ambush\\_Effects\\_of\\_army\\_training\\_and\\_employment](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318128786_The_First_Ambush_Effects_of_army_training_and_employment); CRIN, 2021a, op cit.; and B Griffin, *The making of a modern British soldier* [video], 2015.
  28. Ibid.
  29. Rodway et al., 2022, op cit.
  30. 'Disadvantaged' is defined by the Department for Education (DfE) for schools in England as students eligible for free school meals or in care. DfE, 'National table NA21b: Pupil destinations after completing key stage 4 by disadvantage status and gender, state-funded schools (mainstream and special)', 2019, [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](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).
  31. DfE, 'Additional tables - rates: participation and NEET 2019' (Table A7: Participation in education and training of 16 & 17 year olds, England, 1985 onwards), 2020a, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/participation-in-education-training-and-employment-2019>.
  32. Art. 3, Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).
  33. Three-quarters of countries worldwide follow children's rights standards in allowing only adults to be enlisted. Of the remaining quarter of states that still allow enlistment under age 18, only 16 (mostly Commonwealth countries) recruit from age 16. Child Soldiers International, *Why 18 matters: A rights-based analysis of child recruitment*, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/t9uw7hq>.
  34. The Committee's *General Comment on adolescence on the implementation of the rights of the child during adolescence* records 'deep concern' that adolescent children continue to be recruited into state armed forces (para 81) and specifies that the minimum age for entry should be 18 (para 40). UN CRC, *General Comment on adolescence on the implementation of the rights of the child during adolescence*, 2016a, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/general-comments-and-recommendations/general-comment-no-20-2016-implementation-rights>.

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36. For example: 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 Campbell, 'Childhood trauma: a major risk factor in the military recruitment of young people', *BMJ Military Health*, 2022b, <https://militaryhealth.bmj.com/content/jramc/early/2022/05/31/bmj.military-2022-002149.full.pdf>; R Abu-Hayyeh and G Singh, 'Adverse health effects of recruiting child soldiers', *BMJ Paediatrics Open*, 2019, 3(e000325), <https://bmjpaedsopen.bmj.com/content/3/1/e000325>.
37. See, for example, letter from CRIN and other children's rights organisations to the Secretary of State for Defence, 22 June 2021 (2021b), <https://home.crin.org/s/Joint-letter-to-SofS-Defence-22-June-2021.pdf>.
38. B Quinn, 'Parents call for British army college to be shut down after abuse claims', *Guardian*, 18 November 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/nov/18/parents-call-for-british-army-college-to-be-shut-down-after-abuse-claims>.
39. A YouGov poll in 2022 found that 73% of the public believed the minimum enlistment age should be at least 18, 17% thought it should be 16 or 17 (and 1% that it should be less than 16), and 9% did not express a view. YouGov, 'Most Britons think you shouldn't be allowed to join the armed forces until you are at least 18 years old', in 'YouGov Study of War: Britons on serving in the armed forces', 2022, <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2022/09/21/yougov-study-war-britons-serving-armed-forces>.

## Introduction (40-44)

40. Three-quarters of countries worldwide follow children's rights standards in allowing only adults to be enlisted. Of the remaining quarter of states that still allow enlistment under age 18, only 16 (largely Commonwealth countries) recruit from age 16: Bangladesh, Canada, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Egypt, El Salvador, India, Iran, Mauritania, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Trinidad and Tobago, United Arab Emirates, and Zambia. Child Soldiers International, 2018, op cit.
41. Between 2017–18 and 2021–22, 27% of the army's enlisted intake was aged under 18. MoD, *UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics: April 2022* (Data tables), 2022a, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/uk-armed-forces-biannual-diversity-statistics-april-2022>, Table 9.
42. C Cooper, D Gee, 'Youngest British army recruits come disproportionately from England's most deprived constituencies', 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/yx8osqhz>; Oxford Economics, 2021, op cit., p. 36, <https://www.oxfordeconomics.com/publication/open/352676>.
43. S J Lewis, L Arseneault, A Caspi, et al. 'The epidemiology of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder in a representative cohort of young people in England and Wales', *Lancet Psychiatry*, 2019, 6, pp. 247–256, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366\(19\)30031-8](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366(19)30031-8).
44. Art. 3, Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).

## Youngest Most At Risk (45-73)

45. Between 2001 and 2020, the suicide rate in the UK armed forces overall was 57% lower than that found in the same-age general population. MoD, 'UK armed forces suicides: 1984 to 2021 data tables', 2022b, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1063681/UK\\_armed\\_forces\\_suicides\\_and\\_open\\_verdict\\_deaths\\_2021.xlsx](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1063681/UK_armed_forces_suicides_and_open_verdict_deaths_2021.xlsx).
46. Between 2001 and 2020, the suicide rate in army personnel aged 16–19 was 31% higher than that found in the same-age general population. Ibid.
47. Between 2002 and 2021, the standardised mortality ratio for suicide among soldiers aged 16–19 in the UK was 131 (i.e. a 31% increased risk relative to the same-age general population) and 43 in the armed forces as a whole (i.e. a 57% reduced risk relative to the same-age general population), a threefold difference. UK MoD, 2022b, op cit., Additional Table 4.
48. The suicide rate in young personnel relative to same-age general population between 2002 and 2021 has been 51% lower than the same-age general population in the air force and 1% lower in the navy. The relatively higher rate found in the navy could be due in part to marine commandos, who make up its intensively trained, ground close-combat arm. Ibid.
49. Ibid., see Additional Figure 10 in source cited.
50. MoD, *Suicides in the UK regular armed forces: Annual summary and trends over time*, 2022c, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1063678/20220331\\_UK\\_AF\\_Suicides.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1063678/20220331_UK_AF_Suicides.pdf).
51. Rodway et al., 2022, op cit.
52. Department of Defense, 2020, op cit.; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022, op cit.
53. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 'Serving and ex-serving Australian Defence Force members who have served since 1985: suicide monitoring 2001 to 2019', 2021, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/c0338ed6-a0da-4f5a-b503-41abde024230/aihw-phe-290.pdf.aspx>; Kristen Simkus, Amy Hall, Alexandra Heber, and Linda VanTil, '2019 Veteran Suicide Mortality Study', 2020, Veterans Affairs Canada, <https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/about-vac/research/research-directorate/publications/reports/veteran-suicide-mortality-study-2019>, Table 5.
54. The suicide rate among US female veterans in 2019 was 15.4 per 100,000, and among women in the general population in 2020 it was 5.5 per 100,000. Department of Defense 2020, op cit.; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022, op cit.
55. 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 'standard entrants', meaning recruits aged 17.5 years and above at date of enlistment). 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>.
56. In the five-year period between 2016–17 and 2020–21, 10,140 army enlistees were aged under 18, of whom 3,898 (38%) were in the infantry, and 29,160 enlistees were aged 18 and above, of whom 8,710 (30%) were in the infantry. Calculated from information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, 22 September 2021, ref. FOI2021/10665, <https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/>

- [request/infantry\\_enlistment](#), and MoD, *UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics: April 2021* (Data tables), 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/uk-armed-forces-biannual-diversity-statistics-2021>, Table 9A.
57. Information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, 14 November 2022, op cit.
  58. See Table 2 in *Appendix B: Data tables* for figures and sources.
  59. See Appendix B for sources and detail.
  60. Information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, 14 November 2022, op cit.
  61. Rodway et al., 2022, op cit., Table 1.
  62. N Kapur, D While, N Blatchley, et al., 'Suicide after leaving the UK armed forces —A cohort study', *PLoS Medicine*, 2009, 6(3), 2009, doi:[10.1371/journal.pmed.1000026](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1000026).
  63. Rodway et al., 2022, op cit., Table 1.
  64. Note that the particularly high suicide rate shown for the UK armed forces is likely due to the younger average age in the youngest age group defined, rather than indicating that military life in the UK is more stressful than in other countries.
  65. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021, op cit., see Table 5; Department of National Defence (Canada), 2022, op cit., Figure 1; Department of Defense, 2020, op cit., Table 2; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022, op cit., Table 1.
  66. In the US, for example, the suicide rate for active personnel aged 17–19 in 2020 was 36% higher than that found in a similar age group in the general population. Specifically, the suicide rate among US active-component (cf. 'regulars' in UK) personnel aged 17–19 was 30 per 100,000 and the rate in the male general population aged 15–24 was 22 per 100,000. Department of Defense, 2020, op cit., Table 2; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022, op cit., Table 1.
  67. R J Ursano, R C Kessler, J A Naifeh, et al., 'Risk factors, methods, and timing of suicide attempts among US army soldiers', *JAMA Psychiatry*, 2016, 73(7), 741–749, doi:[10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2016.0600](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2016.0600).
  68. M A Reger, D J Smolenski, N A Skopp, et al. 'Risk of suicide among US military service members following Operation Enduring Freedom or Operation Iraqi Freedom deployment and separation from the US military', *JAMA Psychiatry*, 2015, 72(6), pp. 561–569, <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapsychiatry/fullarticle/2211891>.
  69. H K Kang, T A Bullman, D J Smolenski, et al., 'Suicide risk among 1.3 million veterans who were on active duty during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars', *Ann Epidemiol*, 2015, 25(2), pp. 96–100, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25533155/>; Kristen Simkus and Linda VanTil, '2018 Veteran Suicide Mortality Study: Identifying Risk Groups at Release', 2018, [https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection\\_2018/acc-vac/V3-1-4-2018-eng.pdf](https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2018/acc-vac/V3-1-4-2018-eng.pdf); Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021, op cit., Table 9.
  70. Australia: Relative risk for veterans aged under 30 = x1.68, derived by dividing veteran rate (34.0 per 100,000) by the rate in the same-age general population (20.2 per 100,000). Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021, op cit., Table 3.
  71. Canada: Relative risk for veterans aged under 25 = x2.52. Kristen Simkus et al., 2020, op cit., Table 3.
  72. UK: Relative risk for veterans aged 16–19 = x3.05. Rodway et al., 2022, op cit., Table 1.
  73. US: Relative risk for veterans aged 18–34 = x1.93, derived by dividing veteran rate (50.6 per 100,000) by the same-age non-veteran rate (26.2 per 100,000). US Department of Veterans Affairs, '2001-2019 National Suicide Data Appendix', op cit.
- ### Why Are The Youngest Most At Risk? (74-148)
74. Department of National Defence (Canada), '2021 Report on Suicide Mortality in the Canadian Armed Forces (1995 to 2020)', op cit.; Mia S Vedtofte, Andreas F Elrond, Annette Erlangsen, et al., 'Combat exposure and risk of suicide attempt among Danish army military personnel', 2021, *The Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*, 82(6), doi:[10.4088/JCP.20m13251](https://doi.org/10.4088/JCP.20m13251); Richard J Pinder, Amy C Iversen, Nav Kapur, et al., 'Self-harm and attempted suicide among UK Armed Forces personnel: Results of a cross-sectional survey', 2012, *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 58(4), 433–439, doi:[10.1177/0020764011408534](https://doi.org/10.1177/0020764011408534); Armed Forces Health Surveillance Center (US), 'Deaths by suicide while on active duty, active and reserve components, U.S. Armed Forces, 1998-2011', 2012, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22779434/>; Mark A Reger, Raymond P Tucker, Sarah P Carter, and Brooke A Ammerman, 'Military Deployments and Suicide: A Critical Examination', 2018, *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 13(6), 688–699, doi:[10.1177/1745691618785366](https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691618785366); J Holmes, N T Fear, K Harrison, et al, 'Suicide among Falkland war veterans', 2013, *BMJ*, 346, doi:[10.1136/bmj.f3204](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.f3204).
  75. Mark A Reger et al., 'Military Deployments and Suicide: A Critical Examination', 2018, op cit.
  76. Normally, no one under the age of 18 is deployed on operations.
  77. See Figure 4.
  78. The army recruits 0.7 individuals per 1,000 population aged 16–24 in the most deprived quarter of local authority areas, and 1.5 per 1,000 in the most privileged. Oxford Economics, 2021, op cit., p. 36.
  79. Amy C Iversen, Nicola T Fear, Emily Simonoff, et al., 'Influence of childhood adversity on health among male UK military personnel', *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 2007, 191, 506–511, doi:[10.1192/bjp.bp.107.039818](https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.bp.107.039818).
  80. James Heapey MP, 'Army: Recruitment: Written question – 19893', 24 February 2020, <https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2020-02-24/19893>.
  81. Rodway et al., 2022, op cit.
  82. Marsh R, Gerber AJ, Peterson BS (2008): Neuroimaging studies of normal brain development and their relevance for understanding childhood neuropsychiatric disorders. *J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry* 47 (11): 1233–1251, doi:[10.1097/CHI.0b013e318185e703](https://doi.org/10.1097/CHI.0b013e318185e703).
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  84. Campbell, 2022a, op cit.
  85. Ibid.

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93. Campbell, 2022a, op cit.; Heim, et al., 2010, op cit.
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96. Kirsten Asmussen, Freyja Fischer, Elaine Drayton, and Tom McBride, *Adverse childhood experiences: What we know, what we don't know, and what should happen next* (London: Early Intervention Foundation, 2020), p. 11.
97. Iversen et al., 2007, op cit.
98. Anxiety/depression in personnel under age 25 and same-age working civilians: 22% vs. 11%. 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?' *Psychol Med*, 2015, **45**(9), pp. 1881–91. doi:10.1017/S0033291714002980.
99. PTSD in personnel under age 25 vs. same-age general population: 7% vs. 4%. 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' (Supplementary Table 2), *Br J Psychiatry*, 2018, **213**(6), pp. 690–697, doi:10.1192/bjp.2018.175; S McManus, P Bebbington, R Jenkins, and T Brugha (eds.), *Mental health and wellbeing in England: Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey 2014*, Leeds: NHS Digital, [https://files.digital.nhs.uk/pdf/q/3/mental\\_health\\_and\\_wellbeing\\_in\\_england\\_full\\_report.pdf](https://files.digital.nhs.uk/pdf/q/3/mental_health_and_wellbeing_in_england_full_report.pdf).
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103. For a survey of the evidence for the impact of adolescent stress on the childhood-traumatized mind, see Campbell, 2022a, op cit.
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106. Sources for this figure are as follows: 1) General population: Office for National Statistics (ONS), 'Number and age-specific rate of suicides in young people, by IMD quintile in England, registered between 2001 and 2020', 2023, [https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/adhocs/15622\\_2](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/adhocs/15622_2) Armed forces personnel: Information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, ref. 2023/01191, 17 February 2023, <https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/943127/response/2238488/attach/3/FOI2023%2001191%20Response.pdf>, 3) Army personnel: Ibid. 4) Veterans: Rodway et al., 2022, op cit., Table 1.
107. P G Bourne, 'Some observations on the psychosocial phenomena seen in basic training', *Psychiatry: Interpersonal and biological processes*, 1967, **30**(2), 187–196; D McGurk, D Cotting, T W Britt, and A Adler, 'Joining the ranks: The role of indoctrination in transforming civilians to service members', in A Adler, C A Castro, and T W Britt (eds.), *Military life: The psychology of serving in peace and combat* (Vol. 2: 'Operational Stress', pp. 13–31) (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006); D Gee, 2017, op cit.
108. McGurk, et al, 2006, op cit.
109. Under-18s cannot leave the armed forces at will; 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).
110. During the first six weeks, recruits are allowed 'controlled access' to their mobile phones for a 40–60 minute period between 8pm and 10pm; the rest of the time it is kept in a sergeant's office. British army, 2018, op cit.
111. For a detailed description, see Gee, 2017, op cit.
112. According to US military officers: 'The intense workload and sleep restriction experienced by military recruits leaves them little attention capacity for processing the messages they receive about new norms... Therefore, recruits should be less likely to devote their remaining cognitive effort to judging the quality of persuasive messages and will be more likely to be persuaded by the messages...' McGurk et al., 2006, op cit., pp. 22–23.



113. For example, read Joe's testimony in this report.
114. R J Ursano, et al., 2016, op cit.
115. US research has also found that suicides among never-deployed soldiers have been highest in the infantry, where they were three times as frequent as in the rest of the army. R C Kessler, M B Stein, PD Bliese, et al., 'Occupational differences in US Army suicide rates', *Psychol Med*, 2015, **45**(15), pp. 3293-3304, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26190760>.
116. Army Foundation College Harrogate, 2022, op cit., pp. 28, 38.
117. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
118. Cited in Gee, 2017, op cit., p. 59.
119. *Ibid.* pp. 57-58.
120. Between 2014 and February 2023, AFC recorded 72 formal complaints of violence against recruits by staff, including assault and battery. At least 13 of these cases were proven following investigation. Leo Docherty MP, 2022a, op cit., and 19 May 2022 (2022b), <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2022-05-16/2317>. Information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, ref. Army/Sec/C/U/FOI2021/13445, 30 November 2021, [https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/alleged\\_abuse\\_at\\_army\\_foundation](https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/alleged_abuse_at_army_foundation) and ref. Army/Sec/C/U/FOI2021/15645, 11 January 2022, [https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/abuse\\_at\\_army\\_foundation\\_college](https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/abuse_at_army_foundation_college) and ref. Army/Sec/U/A/FOI2023/02395, 23 March 2023, [https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/army\\_foundation\\_college\\_complain#incoming-2268883](https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/army_foundation_college_complain#incoming-2268883); Johnny Mercer MP, 'Army: Young people – no. 109376', 4 November 2020, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2020-10-30/109376>.
121. Cited in CRIN, 2021a, op cit.
122. *Ibid.*
123. *Ibid.*
124. S Morris, 'UK army investigators under fire as bullying trial collapses', *The Guardian*, 19 March 2019, <https://theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/mar/19/uk-army-investigators-under-fire-as-bullying-trial-collapses>.
125. *Ibid.*
126. Mark Guinness, *A Review of the Royal Military Police investigations into allegations of the ill treatment of Junior Soldiers at the Army Foundation College (Harrogate) (AFC(H)) 2014/15*, 2018, <https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/880913/response/2093583/attach/5/20220802%20FOI08871.pdf>.
127. 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, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/uk-armed-forces-biannual-diversity-statistics-2021>.
128. 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>.
129. In 2021, 37 girls were victims in sexual offence cases opened by the Service Police, out of a total population of 290 girls serving in the armed forces; a rate of 12.8%. In the same year, 202 adult female personnel were victims of sexual offence cases, out of a population of 16,180, a rate of 1.2%. Leo Docherty MP, 2022a, op cit.; MoD, *Sexual Offences in the Service Justice System 2021 Annual Statistics* [Worksheet 3], 31 March 2022d, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1064458/Murder\\_Manslaughter\\_Sexual\\_Offences\\_Supplementary\\_Tables.xls](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1064458/Murder_Manslaughter_Sexual_Offences_Supplementary_Tables.xls) MoD, *UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics: 1 April 2021* [Tables 1 and 3], 10 June 2021, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1012586/Biannual\\_Diversity\\_Tables\\_Apr21.xlsx](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1012586/Biannual_Diversity_Tables_Apr21.xlsx).
130. In the five years from 2017–18 to 2021–22, 1,430 girls were enlisted in the armed forces, of whom 735 (51%) were enrolled for training at the Army Foundation College. Andrew Murrison MP, 'Army Foundation College: Admissions', 17 November 2022, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2022-11-17/89849>; MoD, *UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics: April 2022* (Data tables), 2022a, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/uk-armed-forces-biannual-diversity-statistics-april-2022>, Table 9.
131. Leo Docherty MP, 2022a and 2022b, op cit.
132. Marc Nicol and Richard Eden, 'Sex abuse claims hit Army college for teenage recruits as instructor is charged with more than 20 offences including five allegations of sexual assault against 16-year-old girls', *Mail on Sunday*, 23 October 2022, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-11346043/Sex-abuse-claims-hit-Army-college-teenage-recruits.html>.
133. Army Foundation College Harrogate, 2022, op cit., p. 5.
134. According to Ofsted reports over the last decade, welfare outcomes at AFC have been 'good' (2013), recruits 'feel safe' (2018), and the college has an 'ethos of emotional and psychological safety' (2021). See Ofsted, 'Welfare and duty of care in armed forces initial training', 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/welfare-and-duty-of-care-in-armed-forces-initial-training>.
135. The most recent Ofsted report is available at MoD, 'Nine armed forces settings rated good or outstanding under Ofsted new inspection regime', 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/nine-armed-forces-settings-rated-good-or-outstanding-under-ofsted-new-inspection-regime>.
136. For details, see letter from CRIN to Ofsted, 18 November 2021, with reply dated 7 December 2021, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5afadb22e17ba3eddf90c02f/t/61e596af7272d43b01a37628/1642436271456/CRIN%2BLetter%2Bto%2BOfsted%2B18%2BNov%2B2021-merged.pdf>.
137. For examples, see Gee, 2017, op cit.; CRIN, 2021a, op cit.; and B Griffin, *The making of a modern British soldier* [video], 2015.

138. See, for example, CRIN, 2021a, op cit.; Gee, 2017, op cit.
139. 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 2021–22, when the army enlisted 2,030 children, a 30% dropout rate is equivalent to c. 600 individuals per year. Calculated from MoD, 2022a, op cit. and Heapey, 2020, op cit.
140. MoD, 'UK armed forces suicides: Index', 2022e, <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/uk-armed-forces-suicide-and-open-verdict-deaths-index>.
141. J E Buckman, H J Forbes, T Clayton, et al., 'Early Service leavers: a study of the factors associated with premature separation from the UK Armed Forces and the mental health of those that leave early', 2013, *European Journal of Public Health*, **23**(3), 410–415, doi:10.1093/eurpub/cks042. The study examined the prevalence of mental health problems in veterans who left the forces within their four years. Since the right to leave expires after the first few months, most veterans in this 'four year' group will have left in their first few months.
142. Ibid.
143. The point prevalence of PTSD in the general population of the UK is approximately 4%. PTSDUK, 'Post Traumatic Stress Disorder stats and figures', 2022, <https://www.ptsduk.org/ptsd-stats>.
144. C Woodhead, R J Rona, A Iversen, et al., 'Mental health and health service use among post-national service veterans: results from the 2007 Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey of England', *Psychol Med*, 2011, **41**(2), pp. 363–372. doi:10.1017/S0033291710000759.
145. Rodway et al., 2022, op cit., Table 1.
146. Bergman et al., 2021, op cit.
147. Jones et al., 2021, op cit.
148. Jones et al., 2021, op cit.; Bergman et al., 2021, op cit.
149. urged the Committee to ask the UK, 'Will the State Party raise the age of recruitment to the Armed Forces to 18?'. UK Children's Commissioners, 2020, op cit.
150. For example, see letter from Penny Mordaunt MP to Child Soldiers International, 4 July 2016, <https://www.togetherscotland.org.uk/pdfs/MoD-Response-to-Joint-Letter-July-2016.pdf>.
151. 'Disadvantaged' is defined by the Department for Education (DfE) for schools in England as students eligible for free school meals or in care. DfE, 2019, op cit.
152. DfE, 2020a, op cit.
153. 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 between a low of 88.9% among learners at Level 3 and a high of 89.8% at Level 1, which equates to an attrition rate of approximately 11%. DfE, '2018 to 2019 education and training NARTs overall headline' [see table 'Headline', cell H7], 2020b, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/874715/Education\\_and\\_Training\\_Overall\\_Headline\\_Achievement\\_Rates\\_Tables\\_201819.xlsx](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/874715/Education_and_Training_Overall_Headline_Achievement_Rates_Tables_201819.xlsx).
154. 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 2021–22, when the army enlisted 2,030 children, a 30% dropout rate is equivalent to c. 600 individuals per year. Calculated from MoD, 2022a, op cit. and Heapey, 2020, op cit.
155. Major General Paul Griffiths, Director Personnel (Army), giving evidence to the House of Commons Defence Subcommittee on Women in the Armed Forces, 8 November 2022 [video, timestamp 11:18 ff], <https://parliamentlive.tv/event/index/cd5cf1d5-6638-48c5-a54a-976d73d7e5aa>.
156. Letter from Paul Joyce HMI, Deputy Director, Further Education and Skills, to CRIN, 16 June 2022.
157. Judge Advocate General, *Guidance on sentencing in the court martial* (Version 5), pp. 53 ff, 2018, <https://www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/sentencing-guide-v5-jan18-1.pdf#page=53&zoom=100,92,954>.
158. Although a sentence of detention is now only rarely handed down to a service member under the age of 18, former recruits and their parents have told CRIN that recruits thought to be considering going AWOL are often threatened with prison should they try. For example, see CRIN, 2021a, op cit.
159. The Army Terms of Service Regulations 2007, no. 3382 (as amended, 2008, no. 1849).

## Early Enlistment: An Opportunity Or A Cause Of Harm? (149-164)

149. The military training of child recruits, the legal obligations imposed on them, and certain additional risks associated with a military setting contravene several provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, including Arts. 3, 12, 13, 15, 19, 24, 32, 34, 36, 37, 40(3), and in respect of the risk of suicide specifically, Art. 6.
150. Louise et al., 2016, op cit.; Campbell, 2022b, op cit.; Abu-Hayyeh and Singh, 2019, op cit.
151. Campbell, 2022b, op cit.
152. Trades Union Congress, 'UK Compliance with major ILO Conventions 2019', 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/rwvayho>; Trades Union Congress and CRIN, 'Annex 3: Armed Forces Recruitment and Convention 182', 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/vry9n2h>.
153. UN CRC, 2016a, op cit.
154. For example, in their 2020 report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, the 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

## Conclusion and Recommendations (165-171)

165. The Committee's *General Comment on adolescence on the implementation of the rights of the child during adolescence* records 'deep concern' that adolescent children continue to be recruited into state armed forces (para 81) and specifies that the minimum age for entry should be 18 (para 40). UN CRC, 2016a, op cit.
166. UK Children's Commissioners, 2020, op cit.
167. For example: R Louise, C Hunter, and S Zlotowitz, 2016, op cit., K Campbell, 2022b, op cit., R Abu-Hayyeh and G Singh, 2019, op cit.

168. See, for example, letter from CRIN, 2021b, op cit.
169. A YouGov poll in 2022 found that 73% of the public believed the minimum enlistment age should be at least 18, 17% thought it should be 16 or 17 (and 1% that it should be less than 16), and 9% did not express a view. YouGov, 2022, op cit.
170. B Quinn, 2021, op cit.
171. C Cooper, D Gee, 'Has the time come for an all-adult army?', *RUSI Commentary*, 27 May 2021, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/has-time-come-all-adult-army>.
179. Andrew Murrison MP, 'Army: Recruitment', 23 November 2022, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2022-11-23/94699>.
180. To make this adjustment, we have assumed that intake in the two years for which data are missing is proportional to the 18 years for which data is available, and therefore multiplied the 18 years' available data by 20/18 – i.e. by a factor of 1.111.
181. Information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, 14 November 2022, op cit.
182. The minimum age for entry as an officer cadet is 18.

## Appendix A: Further Figures (172-176)

172. Resilience Scale. Self-efficacy was measured using the Sherer Self-Efficacy Scale, and emotional regulation by the Difficulties in Emotional Regulation Scale, reverse-scored. We converted all non-zero minimum possible scores on the scales to zero in order to calculate the relative difference on all measures before and after training, as shown in the graph. The study is described in Army Foundation College, *Project Athena*, 2022, op cit. but the table of results is reproduced incorrectly. We obtained the correct figures under the Freedom of Information Act, ref. ArmySec/U/A/FOI2022/13245, 16 November 2022, [https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/project\\_athena\\_figures#incoming-2168187](https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/project_athena_figures#incoming-2168187).
173. Ursano et al., 2016, op cit.
174. DfE, 2020a, op cit.
175. Goodwin et al., 2015, op cit.
176. Calculated from MoD, Information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, ref. 2021/09403, 21 September 2021, [https://home.crin.org/s/20210921\\_Response\\_FOI2021\\_09403.pdf](https://home.crin.org/s/20210921_Response_FOI2021_09403.pdf).

## Appendix B: Data Tables (177-182)

177. Army/navy/air force personnel figures from Esme Kirk-Wade and Noel Dempsey, *UK defence personnel statistics*, 2022, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7930>; infantry personnel figures obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, ref. ArmyPolSec/D/N/FOI2022/10712, 7 October 2022, <https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/898734/response/2141507/attach/4/20221007%20FOI10712%20Infantry%20Suicides%20Response.pdf>; marines personnel figures obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, ref. FOI2022/11421, 19 October 2022, <https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/905881/response/2149279/attach/3/FOI2022%2011421%20Gee%20Response.pdf>.
178. Male army/navy/air force suicide figures obtained from Additional table 2 in MoD, 'UK armed forces suicides: 1984 to 2021 data tables', 2022, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/972344/20210325\\_Suicide\\_and\\_open\\_verdict\\_deaths\\_in\\_the\\_UK\\_Regular\\_Armed\\_Forces\\_1984-2020\\_Tables\\_and\\_Figures-O.xls](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/972344/20210325_Suicide_and_open_verdict_deaths_in_the_UK_Regular_Armed_Forces_1984-2020_Tables_and_Figures-O.xls); infantry suicide figures obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, ref. ArmyPolSec/D/N/FOI2022/10712, op cit.; marines suicides figures obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, ref. FOI2022/11421, op cit.

"I believe the policy of recruiting for military service from age 16 is due a review. This report highlights some alarming themes, particularly the risks of mental illness as well as suicide in young personnel and veterans, some of whom might already be vulnerable prior to joining the military. While recruitment from age 16 continues, careful oversight of the policy is extremely important, as are proper care and supervision. The training environment should be nurturing, where physical, verbal and sexual threats, bullying and abuse have no place. Regulations governing recruits' conditions of service should also be nurturing and not stifling of young people's options. Staff should be accountable at all times."

**Prof Walter Busuttil,**  
**Consultant Psychiatrist,**  
**Director of Research and Training**  
**at Combat Stress, and Visiting Professor**  
**at King's College, London**

"We are unusual in the UK in recruiting at age 16 for our armed services. In bringing new insight into the impact of early enlistment on mental health, this report merits wide and careful attention. The reader will appreciate why the age at which we recruit ought to be a live question."

**Lord Browne of Ladyton,**  
**Former Secretary of State for Defence**

"This carefully researched and compelling report highlights the increased risk of suicide among young armed forces personnel and veterans compared with their peer groups in the general population. But this is not just a matter of numbers. Each death by suicide is a tragedy, with devastating long-term effects on whole families. Although it is tempting to blame such suicides on previous life events, such as childhood adversity, the robust evidence presented here shows clearly that the at times harsh nature of early military experience, including training, increases substantially the likelihood of this catastrophic outcome."

**Dr Katharine Campbell,**  
**Author and Neuroscientist**



