

America's Child Soldiers: US Military Recruiting Children to Serve in the Armed Forces

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In violation of its pledge to the United Nations not to recruit children into the military, the Pentagon "regularly target(s) children under 17," the American Civil Liberties Union(ACLU) says.

The Pentagon "heavily recruits on high school campuses, targeting students for recruitment as early as possible and generally without limits on the age of students they contact," the ACLU states in a 46-page report titled "Soldiers of Misfortune."

This is in violation of the U.S. Senate's 2002 ratification of the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Pentagon recruiters are enrolling children as young as 14 in the Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps(JROTC) in 3,000 middle-, junior-, and high schools nationwide, causing about 45 percent of the quarter of million students so enrolled to enlist, a rate much higher than in the general student population. Clearly, this is the outcome of underage exposure.

In some cities, such as Los Angeles, high school administrators have been enrolling reluctant students involuntarily in JROTC as an alternative to overcrowded gym classes! In Lincoln high school, enrollees were not told JROTC was involuntary. In Buffalo, N.Y., the entire incoming freshman class at Hutchinson Central Technical High School, (average age 14), was involuntarily enrolled in JROTC. In Chicago, graduating eighth graders (average age 13) are allowed to join any of 45 JROTC programs.

"Wartime enlistment quotas (for Iraq and Afghanistan) have placed increased pressure on military recruiters to fill the ranks of the armed services," an ACLU report says. Trying to fill its quotas without reinstating a draft "has contributed to a rise in...allegations of misconduct and abuse by recruiters" that "often goes unchecked."

The Pentagon also spends about \$6 million a year to flog an online video game called "America's Army" to attract children as young as 13, "train them to use weapons, and engage in virtual combat and other military missions...learn how to fire realistic Army weapons such as automatic rifles and grenade launchers and learn how to jump from airplanes," the ACLU reports. As of Sept., 2006, 7.5 million users were registered on the game's website, which is linked to the Army's main recruiting website.

And when Pentagon recruiters sign 17-year-olds into the inactive reserves under the Future

Soldiers Training Program, (the idea being to let them earn their high school diploma), they frequently don't tell the children they can withdraw with no penalty.

“Over the years, we have had reports from students who were told that if they change their minds, they would be considered deserters in war time and could be hunted down and shot,” the New York City-based Youth Activists-Youth Allies said. One young woman was told if she backed out of her enlistment her family would be deported. And Bill Galvin, of the Center on Conscience and War, said one young man who changed his mind about enlisting and was told by his recruiter: “If you don't report, that's treason and you will be shot.”

Singled out by the Pentagon for intense recruitment drives are urban centers such as Los Angeles and New York. The latter, in which low-income students account for 51% of all high school enrollment and where 71% are black or Latino, contains three of the nation's top 32 counties for Army enlistment. In Los Angeles, 91% of the students are non-white and 75% are low-income.

And the Coalition Against Militarism in Our Schools says the 30 JROTC programs in Los Angeles Unified School District (with 4,754 students) are “Located in the most economically depressed communities of the city.”

African-Americans make up 16% of the civilian population of military age but 22% of the Army's enlisted personnel, the ACLU notes. It charges bluntly: “The U.S. military's practice of targeting low-income youth and students of color in combination with exaggerated promises of financial rewards for enlistment, undermines the voluntariness of their enlistment...”

JROTC also runs a Middle School Cadet Corp for children as young as 11, that militarizes them even before they graduate elementary school. “Florida, Texas, and Chicago, offer military-run after-school programs to sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-graders...(that) involve drills with wooden rifles and military chants....and military history.” Children wear uniforms to school once a week for inspection.

While the U.S. claims “no one under age 17 is eligible for recruitment,” the Pentagon's Joint Advertising Market Research & Studies database(JAMRS) scoops up data on eleventh graders, typically just 16. JAMRS has data on 30 million Americans between age 16 and 25 for recruitment purposes.

The ACLU says this data includes “e-mail addresses, grade point averages, college intentions, height and weight information, schools attended, courses of study, military interests, and racial and ethnic data” as well as Social Security numbers.

In the face of grim casualty reports from the Middle East, Pentagon recruiters appear increasingly desperate to make their quotas. About one in five, the New York Times reported in 2004, was found to have engaged in “recruiting improprieties” ranging from “threats and coercion to making false promises to young people that they would not be sent to Iraq.”

Given the Bush regime's plunge into criminal wars of aggression that defy international law and the Geneva conventions, there is no reason why military recruitment of any kind should be allowed on any college campus, much less in the secondary schools. If the United States truly wished to spread democracy, (rather than seize oil fields), it would be assigning vast

numbers of Peace Corps recruiters to college campuses, and the budgets of the Peace Corps and the Defense Department would be reversed.

As Eugene Debs, the presidential candidate on the Socialist ticket that went to prison for speaking against World War One, (he polled 913,000 votes in 1920) once said: "I would no more teach children military training than I would teach them arson, robbery or assassination."

The fact that the Pentagon is having such a daunting time these days filling its ranks as it wages an illegal war speaks very well for the intelligence of the American people. That's no excuse, though, for the Defense Department to illegally recruit impressionable children. #

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