

Military recruiters work hard to leave no child off their lists

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My daughter just started high school. This milestone was marked by the arrival in our home of a ream of paperwork. Along with the usual bureaucratic permissions, I found tucked into this package a seemingly innocuous form that carries extraordinary consequences: Failing to fill it out might result in my daughter being harassed, assaulted, or being fast-tracked to fight in Iraq.

This form asks us if we want to opt out of having our daughter's contact information sent to the U.S. military. If we overlooked this form, or did not opt out for some reason, our high school is required to forward her information to military recruiters. This is thanks to a stealth provision of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002. It turns out that President Bush's supposed signature education law also happens to be the most aggressive military recruitment tool enacted since the draft ended in 1973.

The military recruiting requirement of NCLB has forced many schools to overturn longstanding policies on protecting student records from prying eyes. My local high school, like most in the country, carefully guards its student-directory information from the countless organizations, businesses and special-interest groups that are itching to tempt impressionable teens. Now, parents and schools are being shoved aside, and the military is being given carte blanche access to our kids. Not surprisingly, abuse has followed closely behind.

In August, an Associated Press investigation revealed that "more than 100 young women who expressed interest in joining the military in the past year were preyed upon sexually by their recruiters. Women were raped on recruiting office couches, assaulted in government cars and groped en route to entrance exams One out of 200 frontline recruiters — the ones who deal directly with young people — was disciplined for sexual misconduct last year."

Take the case of Indiana National Guard Sgt. Eric P. Vetesy, accused of sexually assaulting six female high-school recruits in 2002 and 2003. According to the Indianapolis Star, Vetesy "picked out teens and young women with backgrounds that made them vulnerable to authority. As a military recruiter, he had access to personal information, making the quest easier."

The NCLB recruiter provision is but one piece of a concerted effort by the Bush administration to reach unwitting teens without their parents' permission. In June 2005, privacy advocates were shocked to learn that for two years, the Pentagon had been amassing a database of information on some 30 million students. The information dossiers

on millions of young Americans were to help identify college and high-school students as young as 16 to target them for military recruiting.

The massive database includes an array of personal information including birth dates, Social Security numbers, e-mail addresses, grade-point averages, ethnicity and what subjects the students are studying. The Pentagon has hired the Massachusetts-based company BeNow to run the database. By outsourcing this work to a private firm, the government is circumventing laws that restrict its right to collect or hold citizen information.

If you are concerned about how this information on your children might be used, you should be: The Pentagon has stated that it can share the data with law enforcement, state tax authorities, other agencies making employment inquiries, and with foreign authorities, to name a few. Students will not know if their information has been collected, and they cannot prevent it from happening.

The main obstacle to getting kids into the military — concerned parents — has at long last been circumvented. Private companies can now harvest data on children, and provide recruiters — some of whom are also now private contractors — with the information they need to contact kids directly.

Should skeptical parents find out that the “Mr. Jones” calling for Johnny is offering their child a free ticket to Iraq, the military is spending millions to learn how best to persuade or bypass these negative “influencers.” One Pentagon study is focused exclusively on changing mothers’ attitudes to enable recruiters to “exert some influence on mothers who are currently against military service.”

Grassroots groups are mobilizing against the Pentagon’s massive student-recruitment and data-mining campaigns. Leave My Child Alone (www.leavemychildalone.org) offers online opt-out forms that students and parents can download and submit to schools to keep their names off of recruiter contact lists. The group estimates that as of 2006, 37,000 students have opted out of the No Child Left Behind requirement. Students can also file another form to send to the Pentagon to have their names removed from the giant student database.

I signed my form directing our local high school to withhold my daughter’s contact information from military recruiters. Other parents undoubtedly missed it. When military recruiters eventually come knocking at their doors, these families will find out the hard way what President Bush really meant when he promised to “leave no child behind.”

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