

Military Recruitment Wrongs the Young

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Some professions are more dangerous than others. American football players risk concussions. Online content moderators, reviewing harmful materials, risk psychological trauma. Members of the military are exposed to the risk of death, serious injury, and PTSD. But there's another type of risk that sets military service apart from other dangerous professions: the risk of committing serious moral wrongs. This risk is disproportionately borne by young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Military service presents opportunities for serious wrongdoing, such as killing or injuring people in an unjustified war or killing a non-combatant whilst fighting in a justified war. Imagine being on the ground and making split-second moral decisions: "is that person a civilian or an enemy combatant?" In a new APSR article, Jonathan Parry and Christina Easton argue that current military recruitment practices do not take these "moral risks" of the profession into account. They argue that recruitment practices should be evaluated in terms of whether they distribute moral risk fairly.

The authors focus on recruitment practices in the United Kingdom and center their discussion on four common features of recruitment: the young age of recruits, the focusing of recruitment in disadvantaged areas, the involvement of the military in educational settings, and a wider culture that celebrates the military. These four features of military recruitment practices are not unique to the UK but are common in other countries as well.

Parry and Easton argue that these features amplify and concentrate the risks of wrongdoing among the young and disadvantaged. For example, of all British Armed Forces recruits in the 2021/2022 intake, 23% enlisted as minors compared to 6% and 3% in the United States and France respectively. Young recruits are typically directed into combat roles, where they must make split-second moral decisions. Given that our brains are still developing until the age of 25, young persons are less equipped to make moral decisions.



What's more, the military disproportionally recruits in disadvantaged areas. Many of the young recruits from these areas have been subjected to educational disadvantage. In 2015, three-quarters of the junior recruits that were assessed had a reading age of 11 or below. Rates of experiencing childhood adversity are also significantly higher. These factors can

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impose obstacles to assessing and avoiding moral risk.

The military is also involved in British schools. They fund STEM education, for example, and offer career training to students. In 2012, the UK government also launched an initiative to promote "military ethos" in schools to promote loyalty, resilience, courage, and teamwork. The problem is that students receive a one-sided story of military service. Students are told about the career benefits of joining the military, but not so much about the physical, psychological, and moral risks of the profession. The same can be said about a wider culture of celebrating military service that mostly focuses on the military's successes and virtues but ignores its moral failings and vices. This is problematic because it leads us to underestimate the moral risks of military service.

Critics might argue that young people can benefit from joining the military. A common belief is that it "gets kids off the streets." However, Parry and Easton argue that there is little evidence that the British military increases social mobility. Another often-heard argument is that a military career involves opportunities for doing significant good, as well as bad. But, Parry and Easton argue, since this good could be achieved without exposing recruits to such high levels of moral risk, these benefits cannot serve to justify the moral risk.

This article helps us better understand the rights and wrongs of military recruitment. This is relevant for policymakers who can apply Parry's and Easton's reasoning to evaluate military recruitment practices in the UK and beyond. Their arguments also encourage political theorists to think more about what constitutes just recruitment. While political and moral theorists have thought a lot about the rights and wrongs of starting and conducting war, the ethics of preparing for war has been under-theorized. ■

PARRY, JONATHAN, and CHRISTINA EASTON. 2023. "Filling the Ranks": Moral Risk and the Ethics of Military Recruitment." *American Political Science Review*, 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055423001247>.