

Military Recruitment: A Moral Minefield

LSE Research Briefing

Summary

- Debates about the ethics of war usually focus on how military operations are *initiated* and *conducted*. However, a new perspective from LSE argues that we should also consider the ethics of how states *create* their armed forces through recruitment (especially in light of recent concerns about the size of the UK's armed forces).
- Alongside the physical and psychological risks, **the military is a distinctively morally risky occupation**: military personnel are exposed to a heightened risk of participating in serious moral wrongdoing. **Recruitment policies should be evaluated in terms of how they magnify, concentrate and distribute this moral risk within a society.**
- **British recruitment practices fare particularly poorly on this front.** There is thus a case for reforming existing recruitment and compensation practices, as well as aspects of the surrounding social (and especially educational) context.

Background

- The head of the British army, General Sir Patrick Sanders, raised concerns in January 2024 about diminishing recruitment to the military, and suggested that Britain should train a “citizen army” in light of the increasing threat of war in Europe. His comments raise **wider questions about how the UK conducts military recruitment.**
- **Dr Jonathan Parry**, Assistant Professor in the Department of Philosophy, Logic and Scientific Method at LSE, and **Dr Christina Easton**, British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Warwick, highlight the distinctive risks of the military profession.
- The military is a **distinctively morally risky profession. Military service carries a heightened risk of participating in serious moral wrongdoing.**
- When the use of armed force is unjustified, participants are involved (however blamelessly) in carrying out serious moral wrongs. Even when military action is justified, participation still carries the risk of participating in war crimes and inflicting unnecessary harm.
- Wrongdoing is not only a source of psychological harm – it leaves a lasting moral mark on a person's life. Parry and Easton argue that, if we care about our service men and women, we should care about whether their lives are tarnished by wrongdoing. We should avoid exposing others to excessive moral risks and equip them to deal with the risks that they do face.

Key Findings

- All forms of recruitment involve exposure to moral risk, but **British recruitment practices are particularly objectionable**, in four key respects.
- **First**, as the only permanent member of NATO to allow young people to join from their 16th birthday, the UK is an international outlier in terms of the youth of its recruits. This has attracted criticism, including from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child – yet **23% of recruits in the 2021-22 intake signed up before their 18th birthday.**

- Young people are more likely to be directed into combat roles, while also being less equipped for moral decision-making. The pre-frontal cortex – the area of the brain responsible for long-term planning, assessing risk, regulating emotion and controlling impulsive behaviour – continues to develop until roughly age 25 (nearly 10 years after British children can join the military).
- **Secondly**, the UK also focuses its recruitment in areas of socioeconomic deprivation, and its recruits are more likely to have experienced childhood adversity. Research suggests that heightened stress in childhood can have developmental effects which makes individuals more likely to base important decisions on emotion rather than rational evaluation.
- Deprivation is also associated with educational disadvantage – for example, **three-quarters of junior recruits assessed in 2015 had a reading age of 11 or below**. This disadvantage makes it harder for potential recruits to evaluate the moral risks associated with the military profession.
- **Thirdly**, the UK does not adequately equip its young people to reflect on the moral risks of a career in the military. The military (and related industries) are involved in schooling. Educational resources provided to schools by the armed forces present a one-sided picture of the military.
- In 2012, the Government launched an initiative to **promote a military ethos in schools** via military-led projects. Whatever its other merits, teaching the values of obedience and deference to authority may inhibit independent moral reflection, especially regarding the military profession.
- **Fourthly**, there has been an increase in celebration of the military at the same time as it has become more unacceptable to critique military practice. For example, abstaining from Remembrance Day events is increasingly viewed as ungrateful and unpatriotic. This **stifles debate, increasing moral risk by making it harder to think clearly about the rights and wrongs of military policy**.
- Some might argue that the risks of joining the military are outweighed by the benefits to young people provided by a military career – opportunities to learn life skills and have valuable employment, to protect their country, step out of poverty, and so on. But there is little solid evidence that a military career does have these benefits.

Policy Recommendations

- **The age of enlistment should be raised to 18.** Polling indicates that three-quarters of the UK public support this, research suggests that transitioning to an all-adult military is economically feasible, and other countries maintain a viable military with a recruitment age of 18.
- Recruitment efforts should be less concentrated on areas of socio-economic disadvantage.
- Military recruitment materials should **acknowledge the moral seriousness of the profession**.
- The ways in which the military is allowed to engage with school students should be limited. Where the military does feature in educational settings, the presentation should be even-handed, making students aware of the physical, psychological and moral risks.
- Drives towards patriotism should not be at the cost of an open environment for moral debate and deliberation about decisions to go to war and conduct in war.
- **Military personnel should be better compensated** for the burdens – including the *moral* burdens – they bear. This might include better pay and housing, a supported pipeline to further education and training (as the US military provides), and improved leaving packages.