

# US military recruiters target rural and depressed areas

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As the quagmire the US confronts in Iraq deepens and casualties continue to mount for US forces, the military's ability to replace those fallen with fresh recruits from high schools, colleges and workplaces throughout America has become increasingly difficult. Military recruiters and their commanding officers are taking desperate measures to meet the recruitment numbers needed to sustain a war that is as rapidly losing support within the military as it has with the American public.

A recent Associated Press article by Robert Burns details an interview with Andrew Kerpinevich, a retired Army officer who submitted a 136-page report on Army readiness in a study contracted by the Pentagon. One of his report chapters, entitled "The Thin Green Line," documents that the Army cannot sustain the pace of troop deployments to Iraq long enough to defeat the insurgency. "You really begin to wonder just how much stress and strain there is on the Army, how much longer it can continue," he said in an interview. He wrote that the Army is "in a race against time" to adjust to the increasing demands of this war, "or risk 'breaking' the force in the form of a catastrophic decline" in recruitment and enlistment.

Col. Lewis Boone, spokesman for Army Force Command, which is responsible for providing troops to war commanders, described Kerpinevich's comments as a "very extreme characterization" and claimed that his organization has fulfilled every request for troop levels received from field commanders in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The US Army and Army Reserve were only able to meet their goals in November by again accepting a high percentage of recruits who scored in the lowest category on the military's aptitude tests, according to Pentagon officials. To do so, the military accepted a "double digit" percentage of recruits who scored between 16 and 30 out of a possible 99 on the aptitude tests, said officials who requested anonymity.

According to the Fort Wayne *Journal Gazette*, army recruiting goals were only met by accepting a larger proportion of these low scorers, known as Category IV recruits. Of the new recruits, 12 percent were from this category, although no more than 4 percent can be accepted annually, according to Defense Department rules. While officials disclosed the percentage accepted in October, they refused to reveal officially the November figure. "We will be at 4 percent at the end of the fiscal year, that's what matters," said Lt. Col. Bryan Hilferty, a spokesman for Army personnel. The fiscal year runs from September to September.

The Army recently increased the maximum enlistment age for

new soldiers by five years to 39 in order to expand its pool of potential recruits without prior military service. It also doubled the maximum combination of cash enlistment bonuses up to \$40,000 for the regular Army and up to \$20,000 for the Army Reserve. The "part time" Army Reserve and Army National Guard increased their maximum enlistment age up to 42 as well.

A tried-and-true method for military recruiters of all services is to make promises that can't or won't be kept. One of the recruiter's myths is length of service. As part of the Individual Ready Reserve, veterans are subject to call-up as long as eight years from the start of basic training, regardless of their service contract length. Another promise is funding for college. In reality, two thirds of all recruits never get any funding for college from the military, and only 15 percent graduate with a college degree.

Far from improving their lives, military experience often produces personal tragedy. After spending a few years in the military, veterans are two to five times more likely to be homeless than non-veterans. Even if they were lucky enough to escape physical injuries, many veterans come home with severe mental and emotional illnesses related to their experiences in combat.

Enlistment advertisements cajole potential recruits to join the military and learn a job. Skills learned in the military are geared toward military, not civilian careers. Mangum and Ball, Ohio State researchers who received funding from the military, found that only 12 percent of male veterans and 6 percent of female veterans surveyed made any use of skills learned in the military in their civilian jobs. Stephen R. Barley of the School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University concludes, "The evidence on rates of return to training and the probability of finding a job in one's chosen occupation strongly suggests that, all else being equal, young people should look to sources of training other than the military if they wish to optimize their careers." As former secretary of defense Dick Cheney, now vice president, declared, "The reason to have a military is to be prepared to fight and win wars...it's not a jobs program."

Newly released Pentagon demographic data obtained via a Freedom of Information Act request by *Peacework* magazine and compiled by the National Priorities Project shows the US military is strongly recruiting in economically depressed, rural areas where youths' need for jobs outweigh their perceived risks of fighting wars.

"A lot of the high recruitment rates are in areas where there is not as much economic opportunity for young people," said Anita

Dancs, research director for the National Priorities Project, based in Northampton, Massachusetts. The data from the NPP demonstrates that rural areas are fertile ground for the military's harvest of American youth to meet recruitment quotas. "They want to get away from intolerable situations and the military offers them something different," says Morton G. Ender, a sociologist at the US Military Academy at West Point. "They are these untapped kids that nobody found."

According to the National Priorities Project data, 64 percent of all recruits were from counties with median household incomes below the US median. Median household income is that amount which divides the income distribution in the US into two equal groups, half having income above that amount and half having income below. All of the top 20 counties from the 14 highest recruitment states had a median household income below the national median household income. The majority of these counties had higher poverty rates as well as higher child poverty rates than the national average. The vast majority of the countries were non-metropolitan, and 11 of the 20 were considered completely rural.

Martinsville, Virginia, is a typical example of an area of the lower-income communities that constitute the military's richest recruiting grounds. Located in the Piedmont foothills of southern Virginia, local jobs are scarce. Sergeant 1st Class Christopher A. Barber, a veteran Army recruiter, finds this area one of the most productive recruiting regions. Signing up 94 percent of his assigned recruiting target, Barber attributed his success in part to the region's shrinking job market and the inability of families to afford college. "The job market is dwindling and it's hard for a young man or woman to find something other than the fast-food business," Barber said. The unemployment rate in Martinsville was 12.1 percent in 2004. According to NPP's database, Henry County, where Martinsville is the county seat, sent 32 recruits to the military in 2004.

Mahomet, in east central Illinois, is a bedroom community of Champaign-Urbana, home of the University of Illinois. Champaign County has a relatively low unemployment rate of 3.3 percent versus the state average of 4.9 percent, primarily because of the large number of people employed at the university. The National Priorities Project stats show that 4 recruits came from the Mahomet-Seymour school district in 2004 while 108 came from Champaign County.

Carol, a registered nurse from Mahomet, and her two sons Kyle and Colin were interviewed by this reporter regarding military recruitment at Mahomet-Seymour High School, a consolidated school district of the two small rural communities.

Kyle, a senior, hopes to attend one of two Illinois state colleges in the fall with a goal of becoming a teacher. He said the Army, Navy and National Guard have set up recruiting tables in the school cafeteria over the past year. The recruiters offer brochures and free items such as pens, buttons, and stickers, and talk with the students encouraging them to come to the recruiting office to discuss recruitment in greater detail. Kyle felt they were pretty pushy, "wanting you to sign on the dotted line." The young student decided not to accept their invitation for an office visit despite the calls they made to him at home. Although he felt going to war in Iraq was a mistake, "We can't give up on them now. The

country would slip into civil war." Kyle admitted he might consider Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) when he goes to college.

Colin, a high school freshman, confirms his brother's accounts of recruiters at school. He too approached their tables and received free items with military logos on them. He was against going to war in Iraq and feels the nation was misled by President Bush. "They lied about the WMDs. There was no reason to start a war."

Carol realized that recruiters had spoken to her sons when they arrived home with the free paraphernalia provided them, in addition to their phone calls to Kyle. She feels parents have the right to restrict the military's access to children in the schools. "When I called the school to tell them I did not want the recruiters to have access, they informed me that I should have informed them earlier and that it was too late now. I don't remember them ever telling me that in the first place." Carol said she would not object to allowing counter-recruiting organizations into the school. "If the military can recruit in schools, groups offering other opportunities should be able to as well."

The three largest schools or programs in the country from which recruits were drawn included the GED Test Center in the New York State Education Department, the Gary Job Corps Center in San Marcos, Texas, and another GED-based program in New York. Montana, a state with low median household income and high poverty rates, led the country in state recruitment rates. Rhode Island was at the bottom. High-income neighborhoods are underrepresented while low- and middle-income neighborhoods are overrepresented.

According to the *Michigan Daily* newspaper, the state's military recruits come disproportionately from its rural areas. Seven of every 1,000 young people aged 18-24 enlisted from the state's 45 rural counties. Last year, the area around North Branch, a village of about 1,000 people in Michigan's thumb area north of Detroit, sent 30 recruits to the Air Force, Army and Navy according to NPP's records. Carolyn Medford, a counselor at North Branch High School, said, "There aren't a lot of careers here. A lot of people have relatives who have gone into the service already. They see [the military] as a viable way to start a career." Most who enlist in Michigan end up in the Army.



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