

A recruitment crisis haunts the US military

Thousands of American high school students illegally forced into Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps

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As the US expands the US/NATO war against Russia and prepares for war with China, the military faces a growing shortage of new recruits. Large numbers of young people are increasingly wary, if not hostile, to service in the military. In response, school authorities and the armed services are forcing children by the thousands, probably tens of thousands, into the Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) at their high schools.

The collusion of high schools in the implementation of mandatory JROTC enrollment, a violation of both international law and military rules, was highlighted by the *New York Times* in December. Attempting damage-control, four Democratic lawmakers—senators Bernie Sanders (Vermont) and Elizabeth Warren (Massachusetts) and representatives Ted Lieu (California) and Chrissy Houlahan (Pennsylvania)—have asked the Department of Education and Department of Defense to respond to a series of questions.

In its December feature, the *Times* reported that hundreds of public records requests had proven that “thousands of public school students were being funneled into the [JROTC] classes without ever having chosen them, either as an explicit requirement or by being automatically enrolled.”

Andrea Thomas told the *Times* that she was auto-enrolled as a freshman at Pershing High in Detroit. She said she pleaded to be allowed to drop JROTC, but school administrators refused. She was not alone in being involuntarily enrolled into JROTC. Ninety percent of the school’s 2021-22 freshman class was enrolled. Thomas frequently skipped the class and got a failing grade, but was nevertheless put back in for her sophomore year. She said recruiters pushed the claim that a military career could help pay for college.

Three other high schools in the Detroit Public Schools Community District enroll more than 75 percent of their ninth-grade students in military training. Detroit is far from unique. The list of schools that force students into JROTC spans the US.

Florida parent Julio Mejia told the *Times* that his daughter was initially refused permission to drop JROTC. Only after he met with several administrators personally could he secure her release from the program.

Cities with some schools enrolling more than 75 percent of students include: Vincent, Alabama; Spring, Texas; Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Cape Coral, Florida; Charlotte, North Carolina; Memphis, Tennessee; Port Gibson, Mississippi; San Diego, California. Cities where more than half of all students are slotted into ROTC training include Baltimore, Atlanta, Boston, Dallas, Houston Miami, St. Louis and Washington D.C.

The education news outlet *Chalkbeat* has documented widespread mandatory JROTC enrollment in Chicago. A 2021 report cited the

military’s massive presence, enrolling 7,800 students at 44 schools. That Chicago Public Schools boasted the highest proportion of students in military courses in the nation was a “point of pride” for Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot, said *Chalkbeat*. Outraged Chicago parents exposed the mandatory practices and forced an end to the requirement, after revealing that at four schools, 100 percent of children were enrolled.

Repeatedly, attention has been called to JROTC’s legal and ethical violations. The New York Civil Liberties Union questioned the Buffalo school district on its violation of students’ rights in 2005; San Diego parents exposed similar practices in 2008.

In 2011, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) issued a lengthy report titled “Soldiers of Misfortune,” which indicted the US for violations of the United Nations’ Optional Protocol to the “Rights of the Child,” ratified by the US Senate in 2002, by targeting children under 17 for military recruitment. The ACLU wrote: “Public schools serve as prime recruiting grounds for the military, and the US military’s generally accepted procedures for recruitment of high school students plainly violate the Optional Protocol.”

The ACLU also cited the Department of Defense’s database assembled under the provisions of the bipartisan-supported “No Child Left Behind Act,” enacted in 2001, which authorized the Pentagon to collect data on 16-year-olds and provide it to recruiters. The ACLU also pointed to the pre-JROTC program, Middle School Cadet Corps (MSCC), which enlists those as young as 11.

“Soldiers of Misfortune” substantiates its argument by citing the Army recruiters’ handbook, which is distributed to over 10,000 recruiters. It states, “If you wait until they’re [high school] seniors, it’s probably too late.”

These recruiters are assigned responsibility for all youth attending a specific high school and instructed to “effectively penetrate the school market,” and “be so helpful and so much a part of the school scene that you are in constant demand.”

Recruiters are advised to maximize their effectiveness by “offer[ing] their services as assistant football, basketball, track, baseball or wrestling coaches,” to “offer to be a chaperone or escort for homecoming activities and coronations,” to “[d]eliver donuts and coffee for faculty once a month,” to “participate visibly in Hispanic Heritage and Black History Month activities ...” to “befriend student leaders, such as the student president or the captain of the football team, whom recruiters can develop into ‘COIs’ (centers of influence) that can encourage other students to enlist.”

The violations of the rights of students and their parents have been so egregious that even some military personnel have objected. JROTC

instructor and retired Army Major William White taught in three states and said enrollment was a constant emphasis. He told the *Times*, “Kids were forced into the program,” admitting that even he faced blowback when he tried to help children exit the course.

The *Times* also reported that at least 33 of the program’s instructors were charged in sexual misconduct cases involving students. As a result of the recent spotlight, the Pentagon has admitted to 114 allegations of violence, sexual abuse or sexual harassment by JROTC instructors over the last 10 years.

However, according to Jackie Speier, a former Democratic congresswoman from California, the abuse is far more rampant. “It is chilling to think that after we have been addressing this issue for over 10 years within the military—where we know that cases exceed 20,000 to 30,000 a year and only 5,000 report, and we know that the chain of command has been part of the problem—to come and see this going on in our classrooms, in high school, is traumatizing to me, to be quite honest,” she said.

But no matter how often the military is called on the carpet, the programs continue to expand.

What is JROTC?

JROTC cadets (children between the ages of 12 and 17) undergo military-style physical fitness training, drill like a soldier, learn marksmanship and military history, and wear uniforms. In short, students experience “a taste of the military” under the direction of a retired service member. “The only word I can think of is ‘indoctrination,’” said Florida parent Julio Mejia.

The government has long invested in JROTC and its college-based companion program, ROTC, precisely to indoctrinate patriotism, “discipline” and obedience to authority, and, above all, to increase military enlistment.

JROTC originated in 1916 during World War I, a war that cost the lives of over 100,000 Americans and 20 million worldwide. The high school training program was significantly expanded in 1964 in line with the demand for more US servicemen in Vietnam. That war cost the lives of about 1.3 million people, including over 50,000 Americans.

Presently, six of the eight branches of the US military (Army, Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, Space Force) have JROTC programs that train half a million students a year. (The Space Force program is still in the development stage.)

Unsurprisingly, these programs target the socio-economically disadvantaged, who have fewer options for higher education or are particularly worried about student loan debt. According to statistics presented by the *Times*, 40 percent of JROTC programs are in inner-city schools, serving a student population with a 50 percent proportion of minorities. Especially high enrollment was reported (between 75 and 100 percent of an annual class) in low-income areas of Detroit, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Oklahoma City and Mobile, Alabama. JROTC has been an essential component of the “economic draft,” channeling military volunteers drawn from impoverished sections of the working class.

The military also targets school districts reeling from years of budget cuts. States have allowed JROTC classes to be categorized as “physical education,” thereby allowing schools to lay off PE teachers and substitute ROTC instructors. These military veterans, making on average \$50,000 a year, are not required to have a bachelor’s degree or be certified to teach. About half of their salary is covered by the military, which also pays for students’ uniforms and other supplemental paraphernalia. In this way, ROTC, with hundreds of millions of dollars at its disposal, bribes

impoverished schools with budgetary fixes. For fiscal year 2021, the JROTC budget was about \$428 million.

The military also provides textbooks, another cost savings for schools. But these learning materials are often little more than patriotic and pro-war propaganda. The *New York Times* report cited outright lies justifying the Vietnam War, false claims about the US bombing of Libya, the deceitful downplaying of the US downing of an Iranian passenger jet that killed 290 people in 1988, and more. Two different textbooks, reviewed by the *Times*, ascribe the US loss in Vietnam to “restrictions” by the top brass, echoing the fascistic outlook of Air Force General Curtis LeMay, who incinerated two-thirds of Japanese cities during World War II and later called for “bombing Hanoi back to the Stone Age.”

Some school administrators have deployed JROTC as a means to promote military discipline and rote obedience as an antidote to the terrible effects of the social crisis on youth, including widespread mental health problems.

It is no surprise that the rabidly right-wing National Rifle Association (NRA) funnels millions of dollars to JROTC programs and sponsors competitions at which military recruiters stand by. JROTC instructors often encourage cadets to join the NRA and have volunteered students to participate in NRA fund-raising events.

A military recruitment crisis

Young people have seen the US at war their entire lifetime, as American wars of foreign plunder have raged for over 30 years. From the Desert Storm invasion of Iraq in 1991 to the bombing of Serbia in 1999, the “war on terror” launched with the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the “shock and awe” reinvasion of Iraq in 2003, and brutal bombings and interventions in Syria, Libya and more—the American project for global domination has metastasized into a NATO-US war against nuclear-armed Russia.

Many have seen family members return from these wars, suffering from PTSD or injuries, with inadequate medical care and no decent job prospects. This has had a deep-going social impact.

As a result, “Every branch of the US military is struggling to meet its fiscal year 2022 recruiting goals,” NBC reported, citing “multiple US military and defense officials, and numbers obtained by NBC News show[ing] both a record low percentage of young Americans eligible to serve and an even tinier fraction willing to consider it.”

The report continued: “The officials said the Pentagon’s top leaders are now scrambling for ways to find new recruits to fill out the ranks of the all-volunteer force,” adding that Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks considered the shortfall “a serious issue,” on which they “have been meeting ... frequently with other leaders.”

The “concern” on the part of Democratic Party stalwarts Sanders and Warren will prove to be just another in a long line of cover-ups of abuse of young people by JROTC. The real concern of the Democrats is sufficient staffing and munitions to project US power across Asia and the world, as the ruling class engages in further wars on behalf of Wall Street.

More than ever, the Democrats support the military’s escalating demands for new recruits. All of the above-cited lawmakers who contacted the departments of Education and Defense voted for this year’s record military budget of \$858 billion. None of them, including the supposed “democratic socialist” Sanders, has suggested disbanding JROTC, nor will they.

In fact, a bill was introduced in the US Senate in 2020, co-sponsored by Democrats, to nearly double JROTC. From the standpoint of the military,

the program is wildly successful.

Between 30 and 50 percent of graduating JROTC cadets join the military, as of 2000. General James L. Jones, then-Commandant of the Marine Corps, testified that the value of the JROTC program was “beyond contest.” He added, “Fully one-third of our young men and women who join a Junior ROTC program wind up wearing the uniform of a Marine.” Overall, students who attend a high school with JROTC are more than twice as likely to enlist.

Finally, it should be noted that in line with the Democrats’ escalation of US imperialist wars, the Democratic Socialists of America-aligned *Jacobin* magazine does its part to cover up the significance of JROTC’s vast military recruitment program. Far from calling for opposition to all imperialist wars and the dismantling of the military’s apparatus of mass murder and repression, a January 8 article titled “JROTC is preying on poor students,” by Seth Kershner and Scott Harding, meekly calls for “rein[ing] in the military’s presence and power in public schools.”

The authors suggest, “In their communication with parents, and their training [sic] for high school principals, JROTC leaders should acknowledge what their program is designed to do: prepare America’s children for military service.” They conclude that “fundamental reforms of the program can help challenge the growing militarization of public schools,” and imply that the problem is one of “lax oversight,” sexism and racism.

The notion of “reforming” the US military is perhaps the most ludicrous proposition the DSA has advanced in its role as supporter of and adjunct to the Democratic Party.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality is leading the struggle against war. This is the political fight young people in the US and internationally must take up, by turning to the working class and fighting to unite it on a global scale to abolish capitalism. The profit system not only requires war, it is prepared to destroy the planet with nuclear weapons. The stakes could not be higher.

We say to students and youth worldwide: If we are to have a future, we must fight for it! Learn more about the IYSSE and the fight to stop the US/NATO war against Russia.



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