

British army: Welfare concerns at the Army Foundation College, Harrogate

Introduction

30% of the British army's enlisted intake are aged 16–17.¹ These younger recruits tend to come from deprived areas² and are sought in particular for the infantry.³ This briefing presents evidence for serious concern over their welfare.⁴

The Army Foundation College (AFC)

All recruits aged under 17½ train at AFC, not as 'cadets' but as enlisted soldiers subject to military law. AFC is not comparable with a civilian college; the accredited education available to most recruits amounts to less than one day per week at a sub-GCSE level.^{5 6}

During the first six weeks – the most intense phase of training⁷ – recruits may not leave AFC without permission or use their mobile phones more than once per day,⁸ and have no legal right to leave the army.⁹ The army, however, may dismiss them at any time.¹⁰

Abuse by AFC staff

Between 2014 and 2020, the army recorded **62 formal complaints of violence** perpetrated against recruits by AFC instructors, including assault and battery. **13 cases were proven**, of which **7 occurred since 2017**. A number of perpetrators continued to work at AFC following a finding of wrongdoing.¹¹

Parents and former recruits have told CRIN of routine maltreatment at AFC (their testimonies are available in full [online](#)).¹² Kevin, whose son joined AFC in 2015, writes:

'[He] had been bullied [by staff]... talked down to, called [the c-word and the f-word] constantly... I was able to see first-hand... lads who were limping, some with crutches, also being drilled and marched, trying in vain to keep up with the rest of the platoon. My son said that some keeled over and fainted as they marched and stood to attention.'

Charlotte Poad, a mother of a recruit who joined in 2016, writes:

'My son... came home for a week or two, and... I realised all was not well at Harrogate. I overheard several conversations with his fellow recruits discussing "bathroom beatings" and "things going too far"... [W]e know that staff bullied and abused the young recruits, as well as encouraging fighting amongst peers... He is a completely different person since his time at Harrogate. He has attempted suicide and his mental health is permanently damaged.'

Alison Blackwell, a mother of a recruit who joined in 2016, writes:

'[My son...] told me he was hit, slapped, pushed, kicked and verbally abused by staff... He knew the training would be tough but this was abuse and the staff were power crazy... He told me all staff knew what was going on but turned a blind eye. [He] started drinking heavily and was very withdrawn... he rang me to tell me he was handing in his letter to leave. He told me his request was ripped up in his face. He was only 17 years old [*with a legal right to leave the army*] and devastated at not being able to leave... My son died last year while still serving in the army.'

Joe Turton, who joined AFC in 2013 aged 16, writes:

'One corporal is ok, all the rest are cold and uncaring, or worse. If you ask for help, it's "Piss off, you," or "Shut the f*** up." There's no sign they know how to work with 16-year-old children recruited into the army. They didn't have to touch you to abuse you. [One] time, they announce a tattoo check. We're ordered to strip to our underwear... then to pull up our pants so they can see everything but our genitals. The corporal walks down the line... and he tells me, as I'm almost naked, what he thinks of my body... He just makes fun of my body in front of the entire platoon. It breaks my heart that Ofsted has graded the place 'outstanding' for welfare... The truth is that the friends I met in that place were broken by it. It gave them PTSD, and me as well. Harrogate is dangerous but a recruit can't just say that to a visitor - it's too risky'

Sexual violence

In 2021 alone, Service Police opened **nine investigations into sexual offences against 22 recruits at AFC**.¹³ In one case the suspects were three members of AFC staff.¹⁴

Girls in the armed forces are twice as likely as civilian girls of the same age to report a sexual assault or rape to the police.¹⁵ ¹⁶ In 2021, more than one in ten girls aged under 18 across the armed forces were victims of a sexual offence, according to MoD records of police investigations; **girls were ten times as likely as adult female personnel to be the victim of a sexual offence**.¹⁷

Welfare inspections

Ofsted inspects AFC for its welfare arrangements only, not for the education it provides; the inspection framework for civilian colleges does not apply.¹⁸ Despite AFC's long record of alleged abuse by its staff, Ofsted awarded an Outstanding grade for welfare in 2018. Although CRIN told Ofsted in 2020 about multiple allegations of abuse, inspectors regraded AFC Outstanding in 2021 without mentioning them.¹⁹

Since 2007, an Independent Advisory Panel has reported annually on recruit welfare at AFC. Prior to 2021, none of its reports mentioned the army's record of alleged and proven maltreatment by staff.²⁰

Access to remedy: the Service Complaints and Service Justice systems

Avenues for redress in the armed forces have been widely criticised for long delays, failures of process and of outcome, and low confidence in the system.²¹ In their annual reports to Parliament, the Service Complaints Ombudsperson has yet to appraise the system they oversee as 'efficient, effective and fair'.²² Although the 2018 Lyons Review recommended that serious offences, including child abuse, should always be referred to civilian police,²³ the Government continues to resist this.²⁴

Only two prosecutions for abuse at AFC are in the public domain. In 2021, a former instructor was convicted of assaulting recruits.²⁵ In 2018, the trial of 17 AFC instructors charged with abusing recruits collapsed due to mishandling by the Service Police; among the allegations were that instructors had kicked and punched recruits, held their heads underwater, and pushed sheep dung into their mouths.²⁶

Long-term impact on mental health

The army describes the initial period of training as 'intense'.²⁷ Routine use of stressors, such as the interruption of sleep and privacy and the use of humiliation to induce conformity, add to the psychological load. Compared with adults, adolescent children, particularly those with an adverse childhood background,²⁸ are more susceptible to prolonged stress of this kind.²⁹

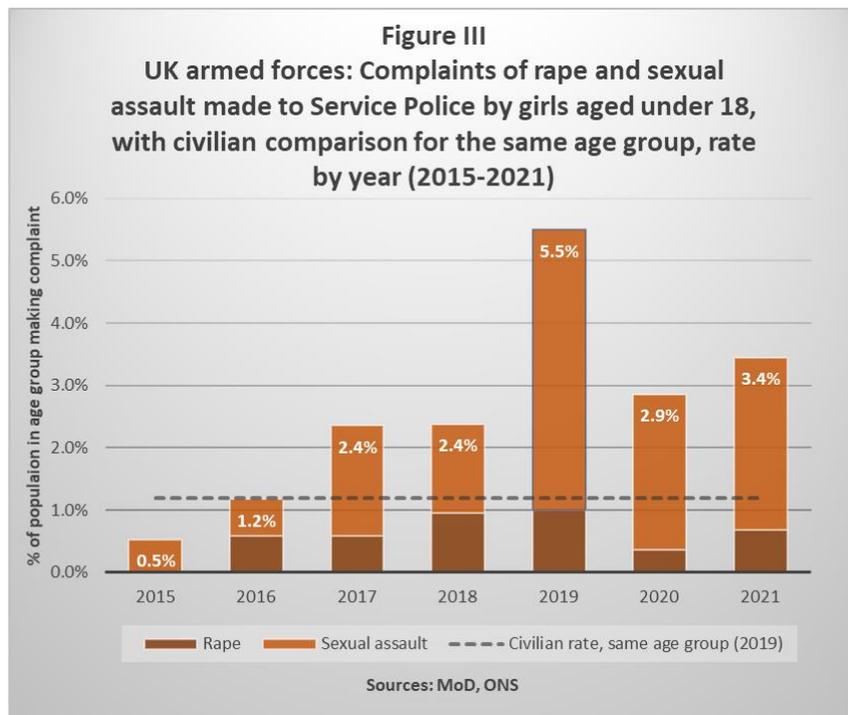
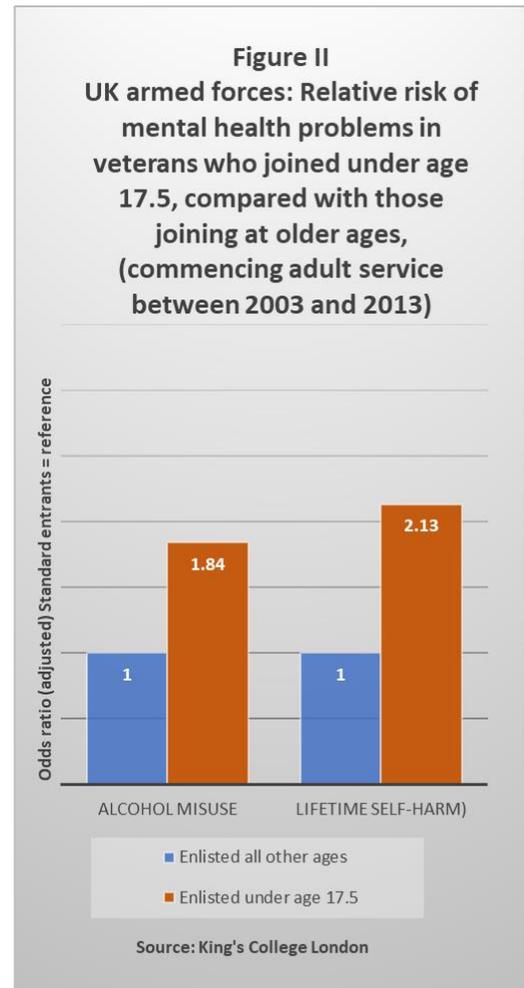
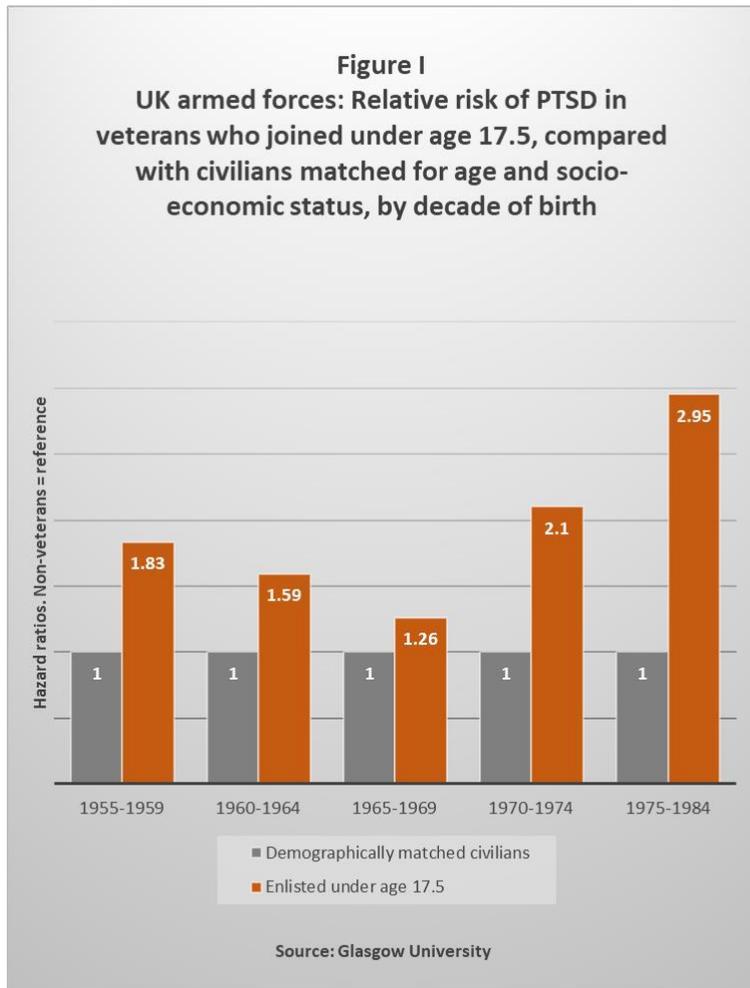
Recent research by Glasgow University assessed long-term mental health outcomes of child recruits to the armed forces. While the study found little difference among those who joined up more than 25 years ago, those enlisted since then have had between two and three times the odds of long-term PTSD compared to same-age civilians from similar social backgrounds.³⁰ Research by King's College has also found that, since 2003, veterans who were recruited aged 16–17½ have had 'twice the odds of alcohol misuse and twice the odds of reporting episodes of lifetime self-harm' as those recruited at older ages.³¹

Since 2002, soldiers under 20 have been 31% more likely than same-age civilians to end their lives.³²

Conclusion

In all actions concerning children aged under 18, the government has a duty to make their 'best interests' a 'primary consideration', and to take all feasible measures to safeguard them from maltreatment.³³ Military enlistment from age 16, which imposes binding legal obligations on recruits, and military training, which leads to an elevated risk to mental health, are unambiguously incompatible with these duties. Multiple formal complaints of violence against recruits by instructors at the Army Foundation College, and an elevated risk of sexual violence to recruits aged under 18 (especially girls), indicate that armed forces training is unsafe for the age group.

Appendix³⁴



Notes and references

¹ In 2021-22, the army enlisted 6,780 recruits, of whom 2,030 (29.9%) were aged under 18. MoD, *Biannual diversity statistics, 2022*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/uk-armed-forces-biannual-diversity-statistics-april-2022>.

² Army marketing is targeted specifically at neighbourhoods where households earn less than £10,000 per year. H Agerholm, 'British Army targets recruitment of young working class, military document reveals', *Independent*, 10 July 2017. The army recognises that 'the majority of the current JE cohort' have a 'tendency to live in poorer areas'. British army, 'Junior Entry Review – Final Report', 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/rg33o8t>, p. 2. Over a five-year period from 2013 to 2018 in England, the rate of recruitment of 16- and 17-year-olds into the British army was 57% higher in the most deprived fifth of constituencies than the least deprived fifth. C Cooper and D Gee, 'Youngest British army recruits come disproportionately from England's most deprived constituencies', 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/yx8osqhz>.

³ According to the MoD, Junior Entry recruitment (aged 16-17.5 years) 'presents an opportunity to mitigate Standard Entry (SE) shortfalls, particularly for the Infantry'. 'SE' refers to recruits aged 17.5 years and above. MoD, *Policy on recruiting Under-18s (U18)*, 2013, obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, Ref. FOI2015/00618, 12 February 2015, p. 2, <https://tinyurl.com/wzos8xw>. Between 2016-17 and 2020-21 inclusive, 38% of army recruits aged under 18 were enlisted for infantry roles, versus 30% of adult recruits. MoD, *Biannual diversity statistics, 2021*, op cit.; Information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, ref. FOI2021/10665, 22 September 2021, https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/infantry_enlistment#incoming-1881507.

⁴ A summary critique of other aspects of the policy of enlisting from age 16 is available elsewhere: Child Rights International Network (CRIN), *British armed forces: Why raising the recruitment age would benefit everyone*, 2021, <https://home.crin.org/s/CRIN-2021-briefing-armed-forces-recruitment-age.pdf>.

⁵ Since 2015 the Education and Skills Act (2008) has required all young people aged 16 and 17 to continue to participate in education. Those in full-time employment must complete 280 guided learning hours of education annually towards accredited qualifications. It is this part of the Act from which the armed forces are exempt. The exemption is specified in The Duty to Participate in Education or Training (Miscellaneous Provisions) Regulations 2013, no. 1205. The army notes that moving to a 'non-enlistment' model at AFC – such as full time education or full time employment – 'would require supervisory care ratios that were higher than the current model, imposing both risk and cost. Any further education college that educates "young people" for more than 295 days pa (42 weeks) must register as a "children's home" and school. The Army is not resourced for such an establishment'. British army, 'Junior Entry Review', 2019, op cit., p. 5.

⁶ The three subjects available at the Army Foundation College are short, Functional Skills courses in English, maths and ICT at Level 1, each graded at 45 guided learning hours, with an option to progress to Level 2 in each subject. Recruits who arrive without Level 2 qualifications in English, maths or ICT are enrolled on the relevant FS course(s) at Level 1, with the option of progressing to Level 2, which combined entail 80 hours' teaching time per subject (240 hours across all three subjects). Over the 49 week 'long course' at AFC, and allowing for the eight weeks of holiday, 240 hours is equivalent to 5.9 hours per week. See MoD, information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, ref. FOI2020/00269/10/06, 5 February 2020. The Wolf Review of Education described Functional Skills courses as 'conceptually incoherent' and said they 'suffer from major and fundamental flaws'. It also emphasised that Functional Skills awards at Level 2 are not equivalent to GCSEs at Level 2 (grades A*-C). A Wolf, *Review of Vocational Education* (London: Department for Education), 2011, p. 170.

⁷ British army, 'Army Foundation College Commanding Officer's Supervisory Care and Safeguarding Directive Risk Assessment', 2018, point 2.1. Information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, ref. FOI2019/05572, 10 June 2019.

⁸ During the first six weeks, recruits are allowed 'controlled access' to their mobile phones for a 40–60 minute period between 8pm and 10pm; the rest of the time it is kept in a sergeant's office. *Ibid*.

⁹ Under-18s cannot leave the armed forces at will; they have no right to leave at all during the first six weeks, after which a 14-day notice-period applies, and after the first six months a three-month notice period applies. The Army Terms of Service Regulations 2007, no. 3382 (as amended, 2008, no. 1849).

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¹¹ Information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, ref. Army/Sec/C/U/FOI2021/13445, 30 November 2021, https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/alleged_abuse_at_army_foundation; Ministerial answer to Parliamentary Question no. 109376, 4 November 2020, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2020-10-30/109376>; Information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, ref. Army/Sec/C/U/FOI2021/15645, 11 January 2022, https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/abuse_at_army_foundation_college.

¹² CRIN, 'Testimonies: abuse of children in armed forces training', <http://home.crin.org/issues/military-enlistment/testimonies>.

¹³ MoD, Ministerial answer to Parliamentary Question no. 154397, 26 April 2022, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2022-04-14/154397>

¹⁴ MoD, Ministerial answer to Parliamentary Question no. 2317, 19 May 2022, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2022-05-16/2317>

¹⁵ Between 2015 and 2020 inclusive, the armed forces service police recorded 31 sexual offences against girls aged 16–17, representing an average rate of 2.5% in the age group. In 2020, for example, the service police recorded eight sexual offences against girls in the age group, who numbered 280 at the time (8 / 280 = 2.9%). Information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, ref. FOI2021/09403, 21 September 2021; MoD, 'UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics: 2021', 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/uk-armed-forces-biannual-diversity-statistics-2021>.

¹⁶ In 2019–20, police in England and Wales recorded 101,478 sexual offences (assault or rape) committed against women and girls, of which 7.3% (7,408) affected girls aged 16–17, representing a rate of 1.2% (7,408 offences / 618,095 population aged 16–17 in 2019). ONS, 'Dataset: Sexual offences prevalence and victim characteristics, England and Wales (2019-20)', 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/ons-sexual-offences-2019-20>; ONS, 'Population estimates for the UK, England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland: mid-2020' (Figure 8, 2019, England and Wales only), 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/ons-pop-2019>.

¹⁷ In 2021, 37 girls were victims in sexual offence cases opened by the Service Police, out of a total population of 290 girls serving in the armed forces; a rate of 12.8%. In the same year, 202 adult female personnel were victims of sexual offence cases, out of a population of 16,180; a rate of 1.2%. MoD, Ministerial answer to Parliamentary Question no. 154396, 26 April 2022, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2022-04-14/154396>; MoD, *Sexual Offences in the Service Justice System 2021 Annual Statistics* [Worksheet 3], 31 March 2022,

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1064458/Murder_Manslaughter_Sexual_Offences_Supplementary_Tables.xls; MoD, *UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics: 1 April 2021* [Tables 1 and 3], 10 June 2021, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1012586/Biannual_Diversity_Tables_Apr21.xlsx

¹⁸ 'AFC Harrogate is not a civilian sixth-form or further education college, despite the inclusion of "college" in its title. It is an Army initial training establishment, and we inspect it as such.' Letter from Paul Joyce HMI, Deputy Director, Further Education and Skills to Child Rights International Network, 16 June 2022. In January 2019, the Minister of State for Education confirmed: 'Ofsted does not grade the Army Foundation College in Harrogate on the same basis as civilian colleges for the age group.' DfE, *Army Foundation College – Written question – 209858*, 17 January 2019, <https://bit.ly/2RmLu43>; see also Annex B in Ofsted, 'Welfare and duty of care in armed forces initial training', 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/welfare-and-duty-of-care-in-armed-forces-initial-training>.

¹⁹ Ofsted, *Welfare and duty of care in armed forces initial training*, 2018, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/708775/Welfare_and_duty_of_care_in_Armed_Forces_initial_training_2017-18.pdf, pp. 37–38.

²⁰ Information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, ref. FOI2022/04543, 27 June 2022.

²¹ See e.g. Defence Committee, *Women in the Armed Forces from Recruitment to Civilian Life: Second Report of Session 2021–22*, 2021, <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/6959/documents/72771/default/>, pp. 45–69; MoD, *Report on Inappropriate Behaviours*, 2019, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/817838/20190607_Defence_Report_Inappropriate_Behaviours_Final_ZKL.pdf, p. 13; Professor Sir Jon Murphy, *Service Justice System Policing Review (Part 1)*, 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/service-justice-system-review>, pp. 42–44.

²² House of Commons Library, 'Research briefing: The Service Complaints system', 2021, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9153>.

²³ MoD, *Service Justice System Review*, 2018, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/918867/SJS_Review_Part_1_Report_for_publication_accessible.pdf, p. 3.

²⁴ In 2021, a Lords amendment to the Armed Forces Bill, which would have required all serious offences to be referred to the civilian police, was voted down in the Commons.

²⁵ J Reynolds, 'Female army instructor "punched teenage recruits"', *The Times*, 9 November 2021, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/female-army-instructor-hit-recruits-and-said-youre-mine-now-bitches-sqpvjkkzt>.

²⁶ S Morris, 'UK army investigators under fire as bullying trial collapses', *The Guardian*, 19 March 2019, [theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/mar/19/uk-army-investigators-under-fire-as-bullying-trial-collapses](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/mar/19/uk-army-investigators-under-fire-as-bullying-trial-collapses)

²⁷ British army, 2018, op cit.

²⁸ M M Kishiyama, W T Boyce, A M Jimenez et al., 'Socioeconomic disparities affect prefrontal function in children', *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*, 2009, 21(6), pp. 1106–1115; D Hackman & M J Farah, 'Socioeconomic status and the developing brain', *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 2009, 13(2), pp. 65–73.

²⁹ A measure of stress in adolescence is healthy, but a high-stress environment becomes toxic. Relative to adults, adolescents are temperamentally more anxious, more likely to experience depressed mood and emotional volatility, and more reactive to stressors, such that they react to stressors with greater anxiety and then remain anxious for longer. Under stress, adolescents are more likely than adults to develop anxiety-related mental health problems, such as depression. The adolescent brain is also more sensitive to repeated or prolonged stress, under which its transition to full maturation is compromised, particularly the development of brain structures involved in the regulation of emotions; there is some evidence that this can lead to lasting problems with anxiety in adulthood. L P Spear, 'The adolescent brain and age-related behavioral manifestations', *Neuroscience and Behavioral Reviews*, 2000, 24(4), pp. 417–463; J N Giedd, et al., 'Why do many psychiatric disorders emerge during adolescence?' op cit.; K D Baker et al., 'A window of vulnerability: Impaired fear extinction in adolescence', op cit.; M L Den, S R Altmann, R Richardson, 'A comparison of the short- and long-term effects of corticosterone exposure on extinction in adolescence versus adulthood', *Behavioral Neuroscience*, 2014, 128(6), pp. 722–735.

³⁰ B P Bergman, D F Mackay, N T Fear, and J P Pell, 'Age at entry to UK military service and long-term mental health', *BMJ Military Health*, 2021, <https://militaryhealth.bmj.com/content/early/2021/04/08/bmjilitary-2021-001786>.

³¹ M Jones, N Jones, H Burdett, et al., 'Do Junior Entrants to the UK Armed Forces have worse outcomes than Standard Entrants?', *BMJ Military Health*, 2021, <https://militaryhealth.bmj.com/content/early/2021/04/08/bmjilitary-2021-001787>.

³² Figures apply to the 20-year period between 2002 and 2021. The suicide rate among soldiers aged under 20 has been increasing since 2007. See additional table 4 in MoD, 'UK armed forces suicides: 2021', 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/uk-armed-forces-suicides-2021> [spreadsheet].

³³ Article 3 and Article 19, Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).

³⁴ Sources for figures:

Figure I: Bergman et al., 2021, op cit.

Figure II: Jones et al, 2021, op cit.

Figure III: Calculated from MoD, Information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, ref. 2021/09403, 21 September 2021., https://home.crin.org/s/20210921_Response_FOI2021_09403.pdf; MoD, Biannual diversity statistics, 2021, op cit. (Table 3); and Office for National Statistics, 'Sexual offences prevalence and victim characteristics, England and Wales', 2021, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/sexualoffencesprevalenceandvictimcharacteristicsenglandandwales> (Tables 13, 20).