

“Fit for Purpose” Cannon Fodder: Recruiting for Violence in the Military

By [Lesley Docksey](#)

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How ‘fit for purpose’ are British soldiers? Are they truly the well-trained, highly professional people that can always be relied on to uphold the standards of international laws while putting themselves ‘in harm’s way’? Not if one reads the evidence that was given at the [Baha Mousa Inquiry](#), nor that currently being given at the [Al Sweady Inquiry](#). Soldiering is a violent trade despite all the denials, justifications and fudge put out by Ministry of Defence spokespeople and senior officers.

There are regiments that have specialised roles – the Engineers and the Signals for example. They are professionals and are justly proud of what they can do. But it is not with them the trouble lies. The soldiers from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, and with the lowest educational levels, are those in the infantry, the ‘brave boys’ in the front line, the cannon fodder who are trained to kill and be killed. Although the infantry only make up just over 13% of the total British Armed Forces, they bear the brunt of the fighting, the killing and dying, the violence that is war.

In March a [study](#) was published: *Violent offending by UK military personnel deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan*. Thick with statistics that have to be balanced with this or that, it still makes for uncomfortable reading. For instance, soldiers who have served in the front line in Iraq or Afghanistan are 53% more likely to commit a violent offence later in life. When the report was published military spokesmen were quick to point out that ex-military personnel are more law-abiding than the general public. That is true but it includes all those who stayed in the Forces until retirement, who had learned to lead disciplined lives and, more importantly, all those who did *not* serve in the infantry’s front line. Burying the awkward facts about what happens to front-line soldiers amongst the figures for the whole of the Army allows everyone to ignore a serious problem.

To disentangle the facts one has to go back to the beginning, back to where so many of the 16 year-old raw recruits came from, the boys and young men that make up the infantry. There are those who join up because they are following a father, uncle or older brother, trusted people who will only ever tell them the interesting bits, the fun times to be had in the Army. There are those who have always wanted a career in the Army. And then there are the rest. Often living in the poorest city neighbourhoods, many from single-parent families and broken homes, in foster or local authority care and with lives already full of violence, these are the children who constantly truant from school, roaming the streets and forming gangs. The truancy, gang culture and a failing social system mean they miss out on the one thing that might get them out of dead-end lives – education.

I am not criticising the teachers here. They are dedicated people struggling to do their best

in inner city schools, starved of resources and their work continuously interfered with by politicians whose only connection with education is that which they themselves received as children. No. It is the whole social system that is at fault, and with rightwing politicians constantly demonising the poor and disadvantaged, one can't help thinking that the creation and *maintenance* of an underclass has always been deliberate. Governments need scapegoats and sin eaters and, given their propensity for waging wars, where else would they get their cannon fodder?

It is these disadvantaged youngsters that are targeted by Army recruiters. David Gee (a researcher into the recruitment practices of the UK Armed Forces) and Anna Goodman [studied](#) how often the Army visited schools within London, and what type of schools they favoured. They found that the most disadvantaged schools (the bottom 20%) received 52% of all the visits made by Army recruiters to schools in the area studied. They also found, despite the military vigorously denying that they ever send recruiting teams into primary schools, a few occasions when primary schools were indeed visited. When the Ministry of Defence were asked for information by the Defence Select Committee they said that they "did not collect socio-economic data on Forces personnel". Yet it seems that does not stop them from targeting a particular socio-economic group.

Many youngsters, facing a future with no job, will, as a last resort, get off the street corner by going into the Army. But oh, how they are cheated. With little experience of the world beyond their small territory, and with parents as ill-informed as them, they believe all they are told by the recruiting teams about how wonderful a career in the army will be – an exciting life, foreign travel, lots of sport and the rest. The Army will train you, they are told; you'll come out with a good qualification, something that will get you a good job when you leave the army. No one tells them that if you want that kind of training you may have to sign up for perhaps an extra three year's service, just to get on a three month course.

If they are able to explore the Army websites or magazines they will be told the same story. And not once is the word 'risk' mentioned, that by signing up they risk being killed, disabled or mentally damaged, the risk that is nobly described as 'putting themselves into harm's way'. Nor is it made clear that they will be trained to kill. That word is totally absent. The enemy may be 'engaged', 'cleared, or 'taken out' but never killed. David Gee's report [Informed Choice? Armed forces recruitment practice in the United Kingdom](#) gives examples of such euphemisms. He writes: "The Army Jobs web site contains 296 pages. It contains the word 'enemy' on 36 of these but does not contain the word 'kill', 'killing' or 'killed'." So even if a potential recruit can read all of this, he will not get any accurate idea of what it is he will sign up to. If he can read it.

For Gee and Goodman also say this: almost a third of new soldier recruits are under 18; and the educational attainment among soldiers is much lower than the national average (in 2008-09 only 8.9% of new soldier recruits with recorded grades for English GCSE had passed at Grade C-A*, compared with a national average of 61% in England in the same year). In 2007 the Basis Skills Agency said, "It is a fact of life that up to half of the British Army's soldier recruits enter training with literacy or numeracy skills at levels at or below those expected of a primary school leaver." That is, recruits were accepted with a reading competence of an 11 year-old or under. However, this was rapidly being altered due to the large numbers of soldiers leaving the Army because of the UK's involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. In an effort to recruit enough replacements, the accepted literacy level was dropped to 7 years old.

Think that's bad? Then think again. In 2010 Gee, [writing](#) about *Young Infantrymen in Afghanistan*, came up with this astonishing comment: "... infantry recruits tend to be younger and from more disadvantaged backgrounds than those joining most other branches of the armed forces. Their educational attainment is also lower: provided that potential infantry recruits are fit and healthy, *they need only the literacy skills of a five year-old to join*" (my emphasis). But those eager young lads are ever hopeful. They think maybe they will be trained as a motor mechanic (after all, they've probably been driving illegally since they were twelve). So when they're asked what regiment they'd like to go into they get ambitious and ask to join the Royal Engineers or some such. Only to be told that there are no vacancies there "but we've got places in the infantry. Why don't you go for that?" Could they, with their lack of any real information, understand the difference and just how that difference matters?

So with the literacy and numeracy abilities of a 5 year-old and probably emotionally underdeveloped as well, they sign up to the infantry and enter a world that, even with their experience of violence within their former life, is beyond their imagining. Much of the training involves what you and I would call bullying – and worse (the facts that came out in the Deepcut '[suicides](#)' scandal testified to that). Some, braver or more desperate than the rest, leave within the permitted first 6 months of training. The others stay on and bond. This is now their 'gang', their replacement family. They are all in it together, whether suffering or getting drunk. The Army depends on that bonding. It means they won't let their mates down, they'll follow orders – and they'll hide the fact that they are mentally distressed. But in any other sphere except that of the British Forces, these are considered to be children. And we have the gall to throw our hands up in horror at the child soldiers of Africa!

In UK law the age of criminal responsibility is set at 10 years old, although this is quite a bit lower than that set by much of Europe. Little children cannot break the law because they lack the maturity to understand the concept of criminal responsibility. But how good would your understanding of the world be if your literacy and numeracy skills were that of a 5 year-old? You'd accept anything the Army taught you, and learn to obey orders without fully comprehending that 'taking out the enemy' is killing another human being – an act that at home would be against the law, the worst of crimes. Old enough to handle a gun, and many recruits from disadvantaged backgrounds would already be familiar with guns, but not capable of reading instruction manuals, regulations or anything else that might help to regulate behaviour.

With so many recruits coming from a disadvantaged background is it any wonder that the *Violent offending* report found that violent offending was most common among young men from the lower ranks of the Army and was strongly associated with a history of violent offending *before* joining the military. It also found that the proportion of servicemen under 30 years old with a conviction for violent offending was much higher than among men of a similar age in the general population (20.6% vs 6.7%).

The Select Committee on Defence 2005 [report](#) on recruitment stated that: ".... the eligibility and suitability of non-officer applicants is tested against certain criteriathose relating to certain types of criminal conviction, create a straightforward bar to entry. For example, in the Army an applicant with a conviction for an offence with a racial element or under the Sexual Offences Act; Street Offences Act; Indecency with Children Act; Protection of Children Act; Sex Offenders Act, will not be considered." So, racist attitudes and sexual offending will keep you out, but plain violence is okay.

Although serving in the front line puts them at a greater risk of being killed or wounded than any other soldiers, a far bigger risk is that of psychological damage. Taken from a poor background, already angry and violent, bullied into making use of the violence then given a gun and put into the front line – what comes home is a young man even more angry and ready to explode. There's a stigma attached to seeking help. It's seen as weakness. Nor does the Army do much of a job, or any job at all, of teaching them how to deal with their anger, how to fit back into civilian life when they leave the Army. Depression, PTSD, drug and alcoholism, all go untreated. The great career descends into homelessness, addiction, more violence and prison.

For all that, life in the Army is great, very satisfying and it's a wonderful career. No. Gee gives some figures for job satisfaction. Compared to 35-36% of civilians who were highly satisfied with their jobs, only 13% of soldiers were. Soldiers are not good at making their complaints known, at least to their superior officers, but some do. Even so, according to a [report](#) released this March by the Service Complaints Commissioner (whose role was set up after the Deepcut affair) the complaints process is "still not working efficiently, effectively or fairly". MPs want the Commissioner to have more powers. The military powers do not want outsiders poking their noses in. As one senior officer [said](#), "We have the highest ranks spending a huge amount of time with the Adjutant-General looking at problems brought to their attention from relatively junior personnel." I like the 'relatively junior' bit. To me that means that the young soldiers I'm talking about here won't get heard at all.

Much of the violence that is caused by PTSD does not manifest until perhaps 15 years after the bloody reality of the front line experiences. It is ten years since we invaded Iraq, less since the fighting got bloody in Afghanistan. The incidence of violent crime committed by ex-soldiers can only rise. We should take account of the waste of lives we have caused, not just the terrible toll we have inflicted on Iraq and Afghanistan, but here on our own streets among the too-young men we sent to war. Are they ever fit for the purpose of serving on the front line? For politicians and generals who like sending armies off to war, of course they are. Uninformed about their personal responsibility in killing an enemy or their right to refuse to do so, not educated enough to know the complicated politics behind any conflict they fight in, or to understand the culture and mores of those who, they have been told, are 'the enemy', they will do what they've been trained to do without questions – kill. And they might die, or come home with shattered bodies and minds. And the politicians who loudly called them 'our brave boys' when they were on the front line, will not care when they end up homeless or in prison. The country deserves better than this. And so do the young lads who, for want of any better life, enlist for the front line.

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Articles by: [Lesley Docksey](#)

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