

# Military Recruitment, Communities of Color and Immigrants

by Titus Peachey

Military recruiters are looking for new enlistees. You see them in high schools, shopping malls, and sporting events where young people gather. Recruiters are particularly interested in the young people most likely to enlist. Increasingly, they are turning their attention to the immigrant community and those with limited economic opportunity

According to the National Research Council, “The U.S. Department of Defense is the nation’s largest employer. There are 1.2 million men and women on active duty, who are supported by 672,000 civilian employees.”<sup>1</sup> With a recruitment budget approaching \$4 billion dollars, the military recruits over 200,000 people each year. The 15,000 military recruiters in the U.S. are constantly searching for eligible new enlistees between the ages of 18 and 35.<sup>2</sup>

## Who is Serving, Who is Enlisting?

In the year 2000, the ethnic distribution of military forces compared to the ethnic distribution in the civilian population was as follows:<sup>3</sup>

	Military Forces	Civilian Population (Ages 18-24)
White:	62%	65%
Black:	20%	14%
Latino:	11%	15%
Asian	6% <sup>4</sup>	5%

For years African Americans have enlisted in the military in numbers far exceeding their proportion of the population. In 2003 for example, African Americans made up over 26% of active duty Army personnel, and roughly 21% of active duty personnel in all military service branches. This 21% figure has been consistent over a period of 20 years, dating back to 1983.<sup>5</sup>

These long-standing patterns are now showing signs of change. For example, African Americans are currently joining the military nearly in proportion to their percentage of the population, a sharp decline from earlier enlistment rates. Latino enlistments are still lagging behind their % of the population. The data below is for FY 2003.<sup>6</sup>

	% of enlistees	% in population (age 18-24)
African Americans	15%	14%
Hispanics	12%	17%
Native Americans/Alaska Natives	2%	1%
Asian	1%	4%

While the focus of this report is on race and ethnicity, it is important to note that women currently represent 17% of the armed forces, down from 19% in fy 2000.<sup>7</sup>

According to the military, when measured by education level, home ownership and parents' occupation, new enlistees show only modestly lower indicators than their civilian counterparts.<sup>8</sup> While the reliability of this data could be debated, it is clear that the military is eager to publicize these numbers. As noted in a 2003 report from the Office of Deputy Under Secretary of Defense, "Contrary to myth, data show that the enlisted force is quite representative of the civilian population."<sup>9</sup>

### **A Poverty Draft?**

Despite these statistics, there is a widespread perception that the All Volunteer Army is in effect, a poverty draft; that many Latinos and African Americans join the military because they have few other options, and that our wars are being fought by youth of color and youth from rural communities suffering from poverty and lack of opportunity. Why this perception?

The history of slavery and the continuing racism experienced by people of color in the U.S. has placed many African Americans and Latinos in settings of poverty. In these settings, patriotism and duty do not draw young people to military service as they may in other communities. For example, according to U.S. Army surveys in 2003, 38% of Caucasian enlistees listed the desire to serve their country as the most important motivation for enlisting, compared to only 20% of African American enlistees.<sup>10</sup>

For some people of color, military service is a way to prove one's loyalty and value to the nation in the hopes of receiving just treatment and acceptance in civilian life. For others, military service is a path toward personal advancement and success that is otherwise difficult to find in their home communities. The use of the military as a path to education and personal benefits is clearly shown in the following data collected by the Army in 2003.<sup>11</sup>

<u>Reasons for Enlisting:</u>	<u>Money for Education</u>	<u>Benefits</u>	<u>Pay</u>	<u>Total</u>
African Americans	29%	12%	6%	47%
Latino	24%	7%	4%	35%
Caucasian	12%	6%	2%	20%

As indicated above, nearly half of African American recruits and over 1/3 of Latino recruits list clear economic indicators as their primary motivation for enlisting.

The military appeals to this economic motivation by offering new recruits tens of thousands of dollars for education and job training.<sup>12</sup> It is difficult for young people in settings of poverty who want further education or job training to refuse these offers. Unfortunately, the requirements to qualify for these education dollars are hard to meet, and relatively few recruits actually qualify and receive the full range of educational benefits.

The realities of the job market also point African Americans toward the military. In 1999, the median household income of African Americans in the civilian population was \$27,900, while African Americans in the military earned over \$32,000.<sup>13</sup>

Impoverished rural white communities also lack opportunities for education and advancement, leading some white youth to enlist in the military as a way out of economic hardship. Indeed, an article in the New York Times (July 20, 2005) notes that soldiers from small town and rural areas of the U.S. are dying in Iraq at nearly twice the rate of soldiers from cities of 1 million or more. The writers believe the numbers suggest that the armed forces themselves are disproportionately drawn from impoverished rural communities.<sup>14</sup> The disproportionate enlistment from rural areas is confirmed in an Army report which notes that, “on a per capita basis, accessions are more likely to come from lower population density zip codes.”<sup>15</sup>

In this way the All Volunteer Army becomes a poverty draft. Even if current enlistees somewhat mirror their civilian counterparts in race and income levels, enlistees enter under vastly different circumstances. While some enter the military because they have chosen it from an array of meaningful opportunities, others enter the military because it is one of the only paths available out of a setting of poverty. For these enlistees, the realities of poverty and racism make military service an option they can hardly refuse rather than something they have freely chosen.

The military is well aware of these realities, and ready to seize the opportunities they provide for recruitment.

### **Targeted Recruiting?**

According to the U.S. Army Recruiting Command’s Strategic Partnership Plan for 2002-2007, “Priority areas [for recruitment] are designated primarily as the cross section of weak labor opportunities and college-age population as determined by both [the] general and Hispanic population.”<sup>16</sup>

Population studies show that Latinos are the fastest-growing group in the U.S. In fact, the Latino share of 18-year-olds in the U.S. population is expected to grow from 14% to 22% over the next several decades. The military keeps a close watch on these trends, as they have implications for recruitment. Indeed, military researchers look not only at immigration patterns, but also at the higher fertility rates of immigrant populations to help determine where to invest their recruitment resources.<sup>17</sup>

Dave Griesmer, a spokesman for the Marine Corps Recruiting Command, noted in an LA Times Article, “You’re not going to waste your resources if you’re in sales in a market that is not going to produce...We certainly don’t discount any school. But if 95% of kids in that area go on to college, a recruiter is going to decide where the best market is. Recruiters need to prioritize.”<sup>18</sup>

His comments were echoed by Kurt Gilroy who directs recruiting policy for the Office of the Secretary of Defense, noting that it is important to “maximize return on the recruiting dollar [because] the advertising and marketing research people tell us to go where the low-hanging fruit

is. In other words, we fish where the fish are.”<sup>19</sup>

In a Los Angeles Times article, Erika Hayasaki chronicles the differing attention military recruiters give to high schools in southern California. At Sylmar High School, attended primarily by low-income Latino students, military recruiters walk around freely during lunch. But 16 year-old Erika Herran comments: “I can’t even remember a time when I have seen a college recruiter on campus.”<sup>20</sup> In contrast, San Marino High School in the affluent San Gabriel Valley neighborhood rarely sees recruiters. According to career center director Shanna Soltis, 98% of the graduates at San Marino attend college.<sup>21</sup>

Notes retired Army officer Richard I. Stark Jr., “Once you start [recruiting at a school heavily], it’s like a snowball. As more people from the school join the military, they go back on leave, walk around in their spiffy uniforms, brag about accomplishments. That generates interest by more recruits.”<sup>22</sup>

As a group, Latinos are still under-represented in the military, but it is clear that the military is trying hard to close this gap. In July of 2002, President Bush announced that “non-naturalized soldiers serving honorably in the war on terrorism could significantly step up the process of citizenship and apply immediately or upon enlisting.”<sup>23</sup> While this opportunity is open to all nationalities, the high number of Latino immigrants makes it particularly appealing to this group.

The Hispanic Access Initiative “...provides for ROTC recruiters to especially target colleges and high schools with a sizable Latino student body.”<sup>24</sup> While the Reserve Officer Training Corps program is officially not a recruiting effort, around 40% of JROTC graduates enlist in the military. African American and Latino students make up over 50% of the participants in JROTC programs.<sup>25</sup>

A recent policy change in the Army allows the number of enlistees without a high school diploma to rise to 10%, up from 8% last year. While high school drop-outs can be found among all racial groups, the rate is particularly high among Mexican-Americans. U.S. born Mexican-Americans have a drop-out rate of 30%. The number doubles to 61% for new immigrants.<sup>26</sup>

So it is clear that the very design of military recruitment, with its grand offers of money for college, effectively targets those who do not have other good options. As recruiters strain to meet recruitment goals in an increasingly difficult environment, they put their time and effort into those most likely to enlist, even if these enlistees are pushed there by circumstance. For some, the circumstance is immigration.

### **Military Recruitment, Immigrants and Citizenship**

In a recent report by the Center for Naval Analyses (CNA Inc.) analysts note that “...one overlooked source of military manpower is immigrants and their families. Much of the growth in the U.S. youth population over the next two decades will result from immigration.”<sup>27</sup>

While legal permanent residents may enlist in the military, they are largely barred from officer positions or positions that require sensitive security clearances. Nonetheless, nearly 8,000 non-citizens will enlist in the military this year, and the Defense Manpower Data Center estimates that there are currently 35,000 non-citizens on active duty in the U.S. military.

The CNA study cites a number of benefits in recruiting non-citizens for the U.S. military, especially noting the linguistic and cultural diversity that non-citizens bring. In addition, non-citizens have a significantly lower drop-out rate than citizens, likely because of the faster path to citizenship which staying in the military provides.

The fast-track citizenship policy initiated in 2002 has often been misunderstood. After it was announced that non-citizens serving in the U.S. military could apply for citizenship immediately, a rumor began to circulate in the Latino community that citizenship was automatic. What was officially announced as a reward for military service quickly became understood as an inducement, or a reason to enlist. And for those already in the military, citizenship applications "...ballooned from 300 a month before Bush's order to 1,300 a month..."<sup>28</sup>

The benefits to military personnel applying for citizenship, as a result of the executive order and the 2004 National Defense Authorization Act, include:

- waived fees
- a streamlined application process
- posthumous citizenship for non-citizens who die while on active duty, and special preferences for immigration purposes of immediate family members.

In 2004, 7,500 military personnel gained their U.S. citizenship through the military, the highest number since the Vietnam War.

However, in no case does military service guarantee a successful citizenship bid. All citizenship requirements still remain. In addition, there is the risk of combat, which is perhaps why non-citizen enlistment applications are now dropping. According to ABC 7 News in Los Angeles, between 2001 and 2004 non-citizen enlistments dropped 20%.<sup>29</sup> While the Pentagon simply states that the numbers fluctuate from year to year, part of the explanation may be in another statistic. As of March, 2005, 142 non-citizen troops had died in Iraq and Afghanistan. These non-citizen casualties represent 8% of the total, while non-citizens make up less than 3% of active duty military personnel.

Indeed one of the first casualties of the war in Iraq was Lance Cpl. Jesus Suarez del Solar, a Mexican-born Marine who died after stepping on an unexploded cluster bomb. His father, Fernando Suarez del Solar said that his son joined the military because recruiters told him the experience would help him become a civilian police officer. Suarez del Solar now warns youth from Mexico to remain in their country so that they can escape the high pressure sales pitch of U.S. military recruiters.<sup>30</sup>

There were other immigrant deaths from Latino communities early in the war, such as Lance Cpl. Jose Antonio Gutierrez from Guatemala who joined the Marines to get an education, and and

Francisco Martinez Flores who enlisted so that he could go to college and become a stock broker or an FBI agent.<sup>31</sup>

Charles Moskos, a military sociologist at Northwestern University believes the military will continue to recruit the new immigrant population despite the recent drop-off in enlistments. “We can’t get enough middle-class kids to die for our country,” he said. “This is the next step.”<sup>32</sup>

### **Why Does This Matter?**

It’s about honesty and justice. The concept of the All Volunteer Army would suggest that people are freely choosing to join, based on reliable and equal access to information. In reality, there are serious questions about the honesty and justice of the recruitment process. Communities of color, immigrants, and persons living in impoverished areas are particularly vulnerable to exploitation.

#### Honesty

Military advertising is less than honest. Military recruiters are sales people who present their product with all the gloss and power that a \$3 + billion dollar budget provides. If the product were four years of active duty with the National Park Service or the Environmental Protection Agency, there would be little reason for concern. But military advertising packages danger, potential life-long suffering and death in a cheery package wrapped in money for college, duty, honor, and discipline. There is no open talk about dying. There is no serious discussion about what it means to kill. There is no warning about the physical and psychological scars that can burden a person for a lifetime. This lack of honesty affects all potential enlistees, but is particularly harmful to persons desperate for some opportunity to advance.<sup>33</sup>

So it is especially important that those most desperate for meaningful options engage in lively and honest debate about the benefits and risks of military service. The following understandings are particularly important:

- military service can be very difficult and stressful; running away from problems at home is often not a good enough motive to sustain a soldier through the high stress and risks of military service
- military enlistment does not guarantee anyone money for a college education or U.S. citizenship...early dismissal and/or a less than honorable discharge will likely disqualify you for educational benefits and citizenship
- the military enlistment contract is one-sided; none of the promises made by the recruiter have to be kept
- no enlistee is immune from being sent to combat, or from the physical and psychological dangers of war.
- military service does not shield one from racism and exclusion in civilian life after one returns.

#### Justice

Is it an act of justice to offer those in poverty the option of money for college in return for service in the military? Or is it an act of exploitation?

It is not possible to totally reduce new enlistees to simple dots on charts depicting the factors of racism and poverty. Yet it is clear that these realities do influence peoples' decisions about military enlistment. It is also clear that military strategists and recruiters are increasingly savvy about recruiting where racism and poverty push young people toward military options because few other options are available.

This does not mean that individual recruiters have deliberately set out to target low income or marginalized groups. Rather, it is a market-based system that leads recruiters to these groups as surely as if it were part of a carefully designed plan.

The problem with this is that the stakes are high, and the playing field is not level. Andrew Bacevich, professor of international relations at Boston University, notes that

The people who actually bear the burdens of service...have little to say in the making of policy....Could it be that the Iraq War bears at least some of the earmarks of being a rich man's war and a poor man's fight, conceived by well-heeled Washington insiders but fought by those least likely to reap the promised benefits of the American way of life?<sup>34</sup>

To repeatedly dangle money for college in front of a population of high school youth who have no resources and then require a commitment that may take their life is not just. Whether in settings of wealth or poverty, young people should not have to engage in a potential trade of their lives for a college education. For a government agency to place its impoverished youth in this position is an act of exploitation.

There are other options. Our government could offer young people who serve in AmeriCorps, Vista, the Peace Corps, or other civilian service agencies the same benefits as those who serve in the military. Secondly, military advertising and recruiters could address the realities of war and combat with every recruit, including the possibility of death and long-term psychological disorders. We require serious health warnings on cigarette packaging. Why not on military ads?

Until a more just and honest recruitment process is in place, youth of color and those living in poverty will need to be especially vigilant to make sure that a recruiter's promise does not become an act of exploitation.

### Endnotes

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