

Identifying British Army infantry recruit population characteristics using biographical data

Abstract

Background: The infantry accounts for more than a quarter of the British Army but there is a lack of data about the social and educational background of its recruits.

Aims: To provide an insight into British Army infantry recruits' personal, social and educational background prior to enlistment.

Methods: The study sample consisted of infantry recruits who enlisted into the British Army School of Infantry. Each recruit completed a 95 item biographical questionnaire. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the sample in terms of demographic, physical, personal, social, and educational attributes.

Results: The study sample consisted of 1000 male recruits. Over half of the recruits were consuming alcohol at a hazardous or harmful level prior to enlistment and 60% of recruits had used cannabis prior to joining the Army. Academic attainment was low, with the majority of recruits achieving GCSE grade C and below in most subjects, with 15% not taking any examinations. Over half the recruits had been in trouble with the police and either been suspended or expelled from school.

Conclusions: Substance misuse and poor behaviour are highly prevalent among recruits prior to enlistment. Taken alongside existing evidence that some of these problems are commonplace among personnel in regular service, the assumption that the British Army infantry is, in itself, a cause of these behaviours should be questioned.

Key words: military, army, health status, forces, healthy lifestyles

Introduction

In the financial year 2013/14, the British Army recruited 7020 officers and soldiers into basic training in various roles [1]. The infantry, comprising the Army's "foot soldiers" accounts for more than a quarter of the British Army [2]. A freedom of information request shows that up until the financial year 2012/13 the infantry recruited over 3400 recruits annually [3].

Biographical questionnaires measure non-cognitive attributes assuming that past behaviour is a valid indicator of future behaviour in similar situations [4]. There is limited literature reporting biographical data and its relationship with military training success. This study aimed to describe a recruit population within the British Army thereby providing an insight into British Army infantry recruits' personal, social and educational background prior to enlistment.

Methods

The sample comprised British infantry recruits enlisted between 2001 and 2003 and was stratified to ensure that all areas of the United Kingdom, were represented. All participants provided written informed consent, and the Defence Medical Services Clinical Research Committee, along with the Army Recruitment and Training Division, granted ethical and scientific approval.

The US Army Research Institute developed the only biographical data questionnaire extant for military recruits, [5] aiming to determine the relationship between a recruit's antecedant biographical factors and identification with the US Army. This questionnaire was adapted for this study and comprises 95 items grouped within five areas: demographic and physical measurement, education, outdoor education, non-physical activity, employment and coping behaviour. The Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT) was used to identify patterns of alcohol consumption [6].

Descriptive statistics, analysed using STATA and SPSS software, describe this sample in terms of demographics, physical, personal, social and educational attributes, expressed as proportions for categorical and ordinal variables and means with standard deviations for continuous variables.

Results

The study sample consisted of 1000 male recruits who were recruited consecutively at the training centre with a mean age of 19 (SD = 2.3 years) See Table 1. Of the total sample, 23% (n=232) left school before they were 16 years of age, only 9% (n=91) stayed on in school after the age of 17. The ethnic mix was predominately white British, with only 22 (2%) recruits recording themselves as Black British. The mean body mass index (BMI) of the study subjects was 22.5 (SD = 3.5) which was in the normal BMI range. Nearly three quarters of the recruits had smoked, with over half still smoking on enlistment. AUDIT scores showed that over half of the recruits were consuming alcohol at a hazardous or harmful level prior to enlistment. Over 60% of recruits had used cannabis prior to joining the Army, with nearly a third using cannabis in the year prior to enlistment.

INSERT TABLE 1 NEAR HERE

Academic attainment was low, the majority of recruits achieving GCSE grade C and below in most subjects, with 14% not taking any examinations (Table 2). Antecedent poor behaviour amongst recruits appeared commonplace with 87% receiving detentions at school and 76% having played truant. Over half had been in trouble with the police (53%) and had either been suspended or expelled from school (52%). Nearly all recruits preferred team sports and most regularly participated in outdoor activities.

INSERT TABLE 2 NEAR HERE

Discussion

In this sample, a substantial proportion had a history of substance use. Academic attainment was low, with half the recruits having been in trouble with the police and having either been suspended or expelled from school.

This is the only study to have used a wide-ranging biographical data questionnaire on a British Army population to describe antecedent characteristics of infantry recruits, thus filling a gap in the literature

concerning British Army recruitment in the 21st century. A limitation of the study is that data were collected between 2001 and 2003 and there have since been changes to the military recruitment strategy.

Existing evidence suggests that characteristics identified here such as substance misuse (drugs, alcohol and tobacco), low educational attainment and poor behaviour remain commonplace among personnel currently in regular service. Fear et al [7] report that in the seven years following this study smoking remains particularly common in males under the age of 25, who smoke more cigarettes per day than the general population. Over half of the study sample recorded an AUDIT score of 8 or more. Later studies on alcohol consumption conducted on the British Armed forces [8, 9] suggest that the use of alcohol remains consistent with this sample. It is plausible that recruits in our study were entering service when already engaged in hazardous or harmful alcohol consumption [6], suggesting a predisposition that would appear to either persist or increase during military service [8, 9].

MacManus et al [10] identified more recently that 17% of UK military personnel had a criminal record. Within this study, behaviour that resulted in suspension or expulsion from school or the involvement of the police had occurred in over half the sample and truancy in three quarters. The offending behaviour and low educational attainment observed in the study are potentially predetermining factors associated with violent behaviour during and after military service [10].

Substance misuse and poor behaviour are highly prevalent among recruits prior to enlistment. Taken alongside existing evidence that some of these problems are commonplace among personnel in regular service, the assumption that service in the British Army infantry is a “cause” of these behaviours should be questioned.

Key Points

- Substance use and poor behaviour were commonplace in this sample of infantry recruits prior to enlistment, suggesting that the British Army infantry may be recruiting individuals with these problems rather than causing them.

- This study and later studies demonstrate that smoking in male military personnel under the age of 25 remains a consistent issue.
- Pre-enlistment alcohol consumption identified in this study is very similar to the levels observed in the serving population in more recent studies.

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Table 1: Characteristics of infantry recruits (n=1000)

Age in years (SD)	19.0 (2.3)
Missing	3
Age range (in years) n (%)	
Under 18	350 (35)
18	186 (19)
19-20	225 (22)
21 and over	231 (23)
Missing	8 (1)
School leaving age (in years) n (%)	
Under 16	232 (23)
16	669 (67)
17 and over	91 (9)
Missing	8 (1)
Ethnicity n (%)	
White	943 (94)
Black	22 (2)
Other	10 (1)
Missing	25 (3)
Height in meters (SD)	1.77 (0.1)
Missing	31
Mean weight in kilograms (SD)	70.2 (11.6)
Missing	30
Mean BMI (SD)	22.5 (3.5)
Missing	45
Smoking history n (%)	
Smoker	553 (55)
Ex-smoker	138 (14)
Never smoked	302 (30)
Missing	7 (1)
Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT) Score n (%)	
7 and below	401 (40)
8 to 20	465 (46)
21 and above	56 (6)
Missing	8 (1)
Use of cannabis n (%)	
In the last year	324 (32)
More than a year ago	294 (29)
Never	374 (37)
Missing	8 (1)

Table 2: Education and schooling	%
GCSE Results n(%)	
As	5 (<1)
As & Bs	21(2)
Bs	43 (4)
Bs & Cs	122 (12)
Cs & below	626 (63)
Didn't take exams	147 (15)
Missing	36 (4)
Did you ever receive a detention at school? n(%)	
Yes	878 (88)
No	120 (12)
Missing	2 (<1)
Did you ever play truant from school? n(%)	
Yes	762 (76)
No	235 (23)
Missing	3 (<1)
Were you ever suspended or expelled from school? n(%)	
Yes	525 (52)
No	472 (47)
Missing	3 (<1)
Have you been in trouble with the police? n(%)	
Yes	532 (53)
No	468 (47)
Missing	0 (0)
What type of activity did you prefer? n(%)	
Team sports	794 (79)
Individual competitive sports	67 (7)
Individual sports competing against your personal best	107 (11)
Individual sports non-competitive	12 (1)
Missing	20 (2)
How often did you participate in rugged outdoor activity such as hill walking, kayaking, rock climbing etc.?	
Never participated	54 (5)
Participated sometimes	534 (53)
Regularly participated	410 (41)
Missing	2 (<1)