

Uncle Sam wants your child—for military

By Jesse Muhammad
Special to Sentinel-Voice
(NNPA) — Children as young as 11-years-old are targets of military recruiters, who dangle video games, drive flashy SUVs, spin tales of adventure, promise money for college and other pipe dreams and trinkets in a campaign to entice youngsters into military service, according to the American Civil Liberties Union.

The U.S. is violating its own laws in failing to safeguard children under 18 from military recruitment, while high school girls have been raped and groped by recruiters in some instances.

The report, "Soldiers of Misfortune: Abusive U.S. Military Recruitment and Failure to Protect Child Soldiers," found military recruiting practices violate international protocols for the recruitment of child soldiers — a practice the United States routinely condemns in conflicts in Africa and other nations.

The "Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict" was ratified in December 2002. It

is supposed to keep children under 18 from being preyed on by recruiters and guarantees basic protections to former child soldiers seeking refugee protection in the United States or who are in U.S. custody for alleged crimes.

Victor Jackson witnessed violations firsthand after being approached by a recruiter while in high school.

"He (the Air Force recruiter) made a lot of promises to me and the only promise they kept was the part about me getting hollered at and bossed around," Jackson, who was discharged after serving 13 months. "He lied about the options I would have once I got in, the opportunities for me were altered and even the dream sheet they have you fill out is a lie."

Jackson signed up to make money as he awaited the birth of his daughter, but later regretted it. "They moved me from Texas to Delaware, which wasn't my place of choice. I was told that I would get at least six months to prepare myself to go overseas, but within three months, I was in Saudi

Arabia. They made us watch videos to put in us hate for people across the seas, but I saw that everyone over there is not like that. [Recruiters] are a bunch of liars," he said.

"Military recruitment tools aimed at youth under 18, including Pentagon-produced video games, military training corps, and databases of students' personal information, have no place in America's schools," said Jennifer Turner of the ACLU Human Rights Project. "The United States military's procedures for recruiting students plainly violate internationally accepted standards and fail to protect youth from abusive and aggressive recruitment tactics," she said. The ACLU report was released May 13.

The report notes that recruiters disproportionately target poor and minority students and use public schools as prime recruiting grounds. The ACLU charges exaggerated promises of financial rewards, coercion, deception and sexual abuse by recruiters nullify so-called "voluntariness" of recruitment. A 2007 survey of New

York City high school students by the New York Civil Liberties Union and other organizations found more than 1 in 5 students, including students as young as 14, reported the use of class time by military recruiters.

Jeremy Jenkins, a high school senior, was first approached by a Marine recruiter at 16-years-old. "They (military recruiters) are always at school career days and other events with attractive setups to entice young people. I think the national defense is important, but recruiters should only impart knowledge to young people and not influence them under the age of 18," he said.

Jenkins is on his way to the Naval Academy because of his dream to be a pilot. "It had nothing to do with a recruiter or the Jr. ROTC, because I didn't want to join on. However, the Navy has presented me with an opportunity to achieve my dream, but, of course, they make no guarantees," he said.

Statistics from the New York survey noted nearly one in five respondents at se-

lected schools did not believe anyone in their school could properly advise them about the risks and benefits of military enlistment. Additionally, almost one in three students surveyed were unsure if such a person was available in their school. Nearly half of respondents did not know who should be told about military recruiter misconduct.

"I wanted to join the Marines in the eighth grade because they had brochures at the carnivals we had at school," said Toni Cervantes, who is now college bound. "But I quickly changed my mind after hearing stories from my friends who joined and discovered that it was nothing like the recruiters promised. The so-called free ride is a long process."

Are Blacks and Hispanics the primary recruiting targets? According to information from the Department of Defense, from 2000 to 2007, the percentage of Blacks enlisting in the various armed forces decreased by 6 percent while Hispanic enlistment jumped about 30 percent. Defense Department popula-

tion studies revealed most recruits are from lower income backgrounds and only 8 percent of recruits have a parent who is a professional. With over \$1 billion a year spent on recruiting efforts, the Defense Department examines long term trends in the youth population and evaluates how to increase interest in the military.

"It's no mystery that the armed forces target the urban areas," said an Army military recruiter in Houston and the country's southwest region. "We go to a lot of Black and Hispanic schools for career days, programs, and other functions because we have a quota to meet every year as it relates to Blacks and Hispanics. It is true that those students are more adamant to join on with us because of the opportunities that are given to them — although many may disagree. But we do help a lot of people who don't have any other option coming out of high school."

School boards and local education departments are being asked by the ACLU to create a transparent, system-
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