

The Poverty Draft? Exploring the Role of Socioeconomic Status in U.S. Military Recruitment of Hispanic Students

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Prepared for Presentation at the American Political Science Association Annual Meeting,
Washington, D.C., September 2-5, 2010.

Abstract

The end of the U.S. military draft in 1973 re-established the all-volunteer Armed Forces. Some have argued that this change caused a shift in the racial/ethnic and economic composition of the USAF. Much of this work has focused on the motivation of an all-volunteer force and whether military service is viewed more as a job or one's patriotic duty (Moskos 1977). Scholars have paid little attention to the methods by which the military targets and recruits potential enlistees. The conventional wisdom is that the military has created a "poverty draft" (Mariscal 2007) by targeting low-income African-Americans and Latinos/as. While a great deal of anecdotal evidence exists documenting this phenomena, little empirical analysis has been undertaken to address the reality of the "poverty draft." We attempt to identify military recruitment strategies in the Rio Grande Valley in Deep South Texas by questioning current high school juniors and seniors regarding their experiences with military recruiters. We intend to assess whether military recruiters are more active in recruiting students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

The issue of minority representation in the military and minority groups' casualty rate has been prominent since the Vietnam War. The availability of deferments for many college students led to a draft pool made up of a disproportionate number of African-Americans and Hispanics. This in turn led to higher casualty rates for these groups (Talbot 2003). Interestingly however, social protest movements were found to affect these casualty rates as Talbot (2003) shows that the casualty rate of African-Americans was highest prior to 1969 and at that point the casualty rates for Hispanics increased possibly due to the military calling for African-Americans to be taken out of harm's way given the negative attention received from the group's high casualty rate. This effect can especially be seen in states with large Hispanic populations. The population of California was seven percent Hispanic during the Vietnam War but fifteen percent of those states' casualties in the war were Hispanic (Aguirre & Aguirre 2000). The state of New Mexico was twenty seven percent Hispanic but Latinos counted for sixty-nine percent of those drafted in the state (Tracy 2006). Further, one out of every two Hispanics who went to Vietnam served in a combat unit (Tracy 2006). The high casualty rate for Hispanics in Vietnam was a key issue in the Chicano Moratorium of the late 1960s and early 1970s but despite the numerous protests and thousands of participants, limited attention paid has been paid to the movement by the media and historians. Therefore, the issue of Hispanic military service and the group's casualty rate has not received the attention it deserves.

So where then do Hispanics stand in today's military? The war in Vietnam and conscription ended in 1973, so draftee data is non-existent and cannot serve as the clear indicator it was during the Vietnam Era. What has replaced the draft is an all-volunteer military heavily reliant on the recruitment of new enlistees using television advertisements and high school

campus visits with the promise that military service can provide valuable job training and/or money for higher education. Therefore, the question now becomes without the draft are Hispanics still overrepresented or at least more intensely recruited given the lower socioeconomic status a disproportionate percentage of the Hispanic population finds itself in? This paper begins to address the issue of Hispanic service in the military by starting at the beginning of the enlistment process-recruiting. This paper presents findings of a survey of high school juniors and seniors in Deep South Texas which asks them to detail their experiences with military recruiters over the past three years. Specifically, we are interested in whether or not Hispanic students from disadvantaged backgrounds are more heavily recruited than their affluent counterparts.

Hispanics & the Military Today

A 2003 report from the Pew Hispanic Center found that Hispanics were overrepresented in the military by comparing the numbers of qualified Hispanics (those with high school diplomas or GEDs) in the military with the percentage of qualified Hispanics in the civilian labor force. They found at the time that qualified Hispanics made up 9.48 percent of the military but only 8.2% percent of the qualified civilian labor force.¹ Hispanic service in the military is growing. This is especially true for the increasing number of non-citizens who are serving in the U.S. military. As of 2005 there were 2.9 million Legal Permanent Residents ages 18-24 eligible for military service almost half of whom came from Mexico alone. Currently there are 35,000 active duty non-citizen military personnel, more than a third of whom are Hispanic (Hattiangadi et al. 2005). However, recent data also shows that Hispanics are less likely to be officers and

¹ When disposing of the high school diploma qualification, we find that Hispanics comprise 13.35% of the labor force and 9.49% of the military.

more likely to face combat increasing the risk of Hispanic casualties. For example, a fact sheet put out by the Department of Defense from 2005 proclaims that the African American casualty rate is lower than that for Caucasians but then glosses over the following sentence which states that Hispanics comprise nine percent of the military personnel fighting in Operation Desert Storm but eleven percent of the casualties were Hispanic. In returning to the Pew Hispanic Center study their report shows that while Hispanics are adequately represented in the Navy and Marines as low-level officers, they are severely underrepresented in officer corps of the Air Force and Army as well as the upper ranks (Major and higher) in all four service branches. However, it should be noted that while the underrepresentation still exists, there have been increases in the number of Hispanic officers in all four branches of the military since conscription ended in 1973 (Quester and Gilroy 2002), although again the increase in the Army and Air Force has been very limited. Lastly, among enlisted personnel, Hispanics are overrepresented in the ranks of those service members who “directly handle weapons,” meaning of course they are overrepresented among those enlisted soldiers who are most often in harm’s way (Pew Hispanic Center 2003).

One of the reasons for the overrepresentation of Hispanics in the lower ranks of the military could be the lack of social support mechanisms available for them including the absence of mentoring for Hispanic soldiers which could foster career advancement for Hispanics new to the military (Knouse 1991). In later work Knouse (2007) cites the need for alternative mentoring strategies including the use of the Internet to provide mentoring for Hispanic soldiers demonstrating that the problem has persisted for two decades. The persistent lack of mentors for Hispanics in the military could be traced back to the recruitment strategies of the military

especially if more impoverished Hispanics are being targeted, limiting the number of Hispanics that would enter the officer corps.

The evidence to date for the poverty draft is limited and in many cases anecdotal. Jorge Mariscal (2007) a professor at The University of California-San Diego and a self-described “counter recruitment activist” cites a 2007 Associated Press report that finds that three-fourths of the combat deaths in Iraq were of soldiers living in “towns where the per-capita income was below the national average.” Of course this does not delineate these combat fatalities based on race or ethnicity, but combined with the military’s own data from Desert Storm sufficient anecdotal evidence exists, that despite the military’s claims to the contrary, impoverished minorities find themselves in high risk situations more than their Caucasian counterparts. Further, Mariscal (2007) points to the millions of dollars spent by the military to target minorities for military recruitment such as the Army’s "Hispanic H2 Tour" and the "Takin' it to the Streets Tour" which focused on African-Americans as evidence that the military targets minorities for recruitment in the All-Volunteer Force era. The National Youth Militarism Program also offers evidence for the poverty draft claiming that Puerto Rican recruiting offices are four times more successful than the average recruiting office given the island’s high unemployment rate and that most Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) programs are located in low-income high schools serving largely minority populations. James Tracy (2007) has also written about the existence of the poverty draft and cites Mario Hardy’s description of the use of former Secretary of the Army Louis Caldera to attract Hispanics into the United States Armed Forces as evidence. Hardy said Caldera’s recruitment pitch highlighted the advancement opportunities in the military available for Hispanics without mentioning the limited presence of Hispanics in the Officer Corps (Tracy 2007). Most recently, filmmaker Marco Amador released a documentary entitled

Yo Soy El Army, which discussed population growth among Latinos as a basis for increased recruitment by the military and also the methods by which the military targets Latinos including soliciting help from teachers to attract recruits. Again, while this evidence is compelling, much of it is anecdotal and requires greater systematic study to assess the real impact and existence of a poverty draft among Latino youth.

Data and Methods

A thirty-five question survey instrument was distributed to high school juniors and seniors in the Rio Grande Valley of Deep South Texas during the spring of 2010 to assess their experiences with military recruitment strategies. The thirty-five questions asked the students whether they had contact with military recruiters in high school, the methods of contact employed as well as the content of that contact. We also included a battery of demographic questions to ascertain the socioeconomic status of the students in the survey. Our survey obtained 1821 respondents, representing seven different area high schools. 47% of the students surveyed reporting having contact with a military recruiter within the last three years. The high schools we surveyed were predominately Latino, with Latino populations ranging from 83.1% to 99.6% of the total high school population. While some may argue this lack of diversity is a hindrance to our study, we argue that it is a tremendous asset. The homogeneity of our sample when it comes to ethnicity creates a built-in control for the effects of ethnicity. Simply put any differences we find in recruitment across the schools in our sample cannot be attributed to ethnicity as all of the schools surveyed are overwhelmingly Latino.

This allows us to focus on the effects of poverty. Hidalgo County, the location of most of the high schools we surveyed has a median family income of approximately \$26,000, making

it one of the poorest regions in the nation. We used the Texas Education Agency's Economically Disadvantaged measure, which provides the percentage of students who receive free/reduced lunch or whose families receive some form of public assistance to measure the poverty level in each school. Here we find much more variance as schools ranged from having 51.2% of their student population classified as economically disadvantaged to 97.6% of their students falling into this category. While the questions presented to respondents will ultimately allow us to assess multiple aspects of the recruiting process, we present only a few areas in this work given the recent completion of this data set. First, we will provide a set of descriptive statistics to explain the background of our respondents and from there we will develop a logistic regression model that attempts to assess what factors influence the likelihood of a student being contacted by a recruiter. We conclude with a discussion of how students stated that military service was portrayed to them and our path for continued research with our study.

Results

While we are at the nascent stages of analyzing this data set, we have identified several interesting phenomena regarding the process of military recruitment. Table one contains descriptive statistics of our sample showing a closely divided group based on gender that classify themselves mostly as Hispanics of Mexican descent. As mentioned above, over 850 respondents comprising 47% of the sample had some form of military recruitment contact. However, less than 10 percent of the sample completed the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery. Before discussing the evidence for the poverty draft thesis, we did find one interesting phenomena when it came to methods of recruitment. The vast majority of students stated that their contact with the military came through a face-to-face meeting with approximately half of those contacted also stating they received a phone call or letter through the mail. 149 respondents

reported receiving an email from a recruiter and only 45 respondents reported contact through a social networking website such as Facebook. This is despite increased use of the Internet to recruit by the Armed Forces in recent years. In the next iteration of this study we plan to survey school administrators about the presence of the military on campus partially to assess whether the Internet and social networking sites are not employed among Hispanics possibly due to limited economic means of the students in the Rio Grande Valley.

Tables 1 & 2 Here

Our second table presents a logistic regression model where the dependent variable is simply whether or not a student was contacted by the military. What we find is that the educational attainment of a student's parents had no bearing on whether or not a student was recruited. We also find that gender does have a significant effect as being a female decreases a student's likelihood of being contacted by a recruiter. Where we find our most interesting effects is the influence of a school's economically disadvantaged population and its "At-Risk" population.² What we see is that there is a large and significant effect for the percentage of students who are economically disadvantaged with schools having more students in this category being more likely to have military contact. However, what we see is that the effects of our poverty measure are mitigated by larger percentages of at-risk students when an interaction term between the two variables was included in the model. It would seem while poverty does increase the likelihood of recruitment, the military limits the recruitment of students who are at-risk of dropping out; one could suggest this was done to maintain the requirement of a high school

² The at risk percentage is developed based on the population of students in a given school which have already been retained for one or academic years as well as students not performing satisfactorily on assessment tests and high school students with class averages lower than 70 among other factors.

education for entrance into the military. Again, this is only a preliminary assessment of the data, but this is an intriguing finding nonetheless that we will dissect in future versions of this work.

Table 3 Here

We also find interesting results from respondents' explanation of how military service was portrayed to them and the emotions they felt during the recruitment process. As one would expect given the Armed Forces' media campaign; the education and career benefits of military service were prominent themes heard by potential enlistees with 61.7 and 55 percent of students saying these factors were mentioned by the recruiter. Further, recruiters did not shy away from discussing the hard work, discipline and seriousness of military service. However, over 86% of respondents said military service was never portrayed to them as dangerous. As well, while not presented in a table, we also found that when questioned about the details of military service, it appears that recruiters do not convey much information about jobs and deployment. Less than half of all respondents with military contact said specific positions and job responsibilities within the military were discussed and about half responded that no explanation of the difference between combat and non-combat positions was given. Lastly, two thirds of respondents were given no information about the number of expected deployments and their duration. These results are troubling as it appears high school students are being given rose colored glasses with which to view military service and are not being given accurate or honest information about what their potential service may entail.

Discussion

We found mixed evidence for the existence of the poverty draft in our study. As stated previously, we are only beginning to examine this data and employ a full and thorough statistical

analysis. Our current surveys with high schools principals explaining their position on military recruitment will also enlighten our results as there may be school specific factors influencing the presence of recruiters on campus dependent upon the views of the school's administration. We are confident the full study will enable us to draw more definitive conclusions about the existence of the poverty draft.

Despite the mixed findings concerning the central question of our study we feel this research will ultimately contribute to verifying or refuting the existence of the poverty draft and will also make contributions in understanding two other important facets of military recruitment. First, this study has drawn our attention to recruiters in the Rio Grande Valley not using modern technology to attract new enlistments. As we proceed with this work, greater attention will need to be paid to this issue as it may be that this recruitment method is only used for upper-income or non-minority recruits. Second, our preliminary results have also brought to light the disheartening finding that recruiters are not fully explaining the risks and requirements of service in the Armed Forces. Considering the gravity of the decision to enlist and the relative immaturity of teenagers the absence of complete information regarding military service can be considered unethical. These three findings together, we believe, signifies an important first step in opening the black box that is military recruitment and we believe further analysis of this data will aid in the continuance of that discovery.

Table 1- Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Statistic
Students Taking the ASVAB	9.5%
Students Having Military Contact	47%
Self-Initiated Military Contact	10.7%
Hispanic Students	94.6%
Mexican or Mexican American Students	94.9%
Female	50.8%
Median Age	17

Table 2- Logistic Regression Model of Military Contact

Variable	Coefficient (SE)	Z-Score	Predicted Probabilities
Percentage of Economically Disadvantaged Students	0.213 (0.032) ⁺	6.72	46.2%**
Percentage of “At-Risk” Students	0.054 (0.037)	1.46	-----
Students Taking the ASVAB	1.40 (0.215) ⁺	6.52	34%*
Mother’s Education Level	0.006 (0.053)	0.11	-----
Father’s Education Level	0.084 (0.054)	1.54	-----
Gender	-0.322 (0.103) ⁺	-3.13	8%*
Age	0.089 (0.068)	1.31	-----
Econ. Disadvantaged.-At Risk Interaction	-0.002 (0.001) ⁺	-4.20	43.3%**
Constant	-11.66 (2.03) ⁺	-5.74	-----

⁺Significant at the p<0.01 level.

*Change in probability of military contact as variable value goes from its minimum to maximum.

** Change in probability of military contact as variable value goes from its mean to maximum.

Table 3-Portrayal of Military Service to Respondents & Emotional Responses to Recruitment

Portrayal of Military Service	Percentage of Respondents Reporting	Emotional Responses	Percentage of Respondents Reporting
Bonding experience/life-long friendships	28.4%	Anxious	21.9%
Career-oriented	55%	Confident	43.1%
Dangerous	13.5%	Empowered	24%
Discipline-oriented	40.1%	Excited	37.4%
Educational	61.7%	Insecure	15.1%
Exciting/Fun	33.2%	Obligated	14.9%
Hard work	48.7%	Patriotic	38.7%
High-tech	18.1%	Pressured	18.4%
Improving life chances	46.1%	Relieved	16.4%
Masculine	15.8%	Unpatriotic	6.9%
Patriotic	33.9%	Worried	22.4%
Personal development	27.2%		
Physically demanding	28.3%		
Respected/Serious	46.5%		

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