

# rural new york minute

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## The Reluctant Rural Warriors

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Nationally, less than 2 percent of young people between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five are on active military duty, yet a recent report by the Carsey Institute finds that a significantly larger share of the young people fighting and dying in Iraq and Afghanistan come from rural America ([http://www.carseyinstitute.unh.edu/publications/FS\\_ruralsoldiers\\_06.pdf](http://www.carseyinstitute.unh.edu/publications/FS_ruralsoldiers_06.pdf)). Why do rural youth have such high military enlistment rates?

The short answer to this question is that for many rural youth, enlisting in the military is very often the only real opportunity they have to leave their communities, particularly if they hold only a high-school diploma. In our book *"Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What it Means for America"*, we explore the reasons behind the rural youth exodus. Though the youth profiled hail from Iowa, the stories these young Midwesterners tell resonate with the experiences of small-town young adults in rural New York State and across the nation. We found that enlisting represents the best, and possibly the only escape, out of the region's faltering farm and factory based economy.

Most youth headed to the military are not destined for college—not because they don't want a degree, but because their parents can't afford it. They might lack the grades and money to attend the best colleges, but they have no desire to settle into married life with their high-school sweetheart or get a job that may well be the same job they have when they retire. In indepth interviews, young people in rural Iowa told us that in old age, when they reflect on their lives, they don't want to regret missed opportunities: not seeing the rest of the country or the world, never taking a plane or seeing the ocean.

Given the economic downturn of most rural areas and in the face of record-long deployments, "enlistment bonuses" have become one of the recruiters' most powerful aids in convincing young recruits to sign up. For an eighteen-year-old soon-to-be high-school graduate from a small town, how long would it take to get \$20,000 in cash? Young people heading off to war engage in a cost-benefit calculus when thinking about whether to put themselves in harm's way or not. They weigh what they can do if they stay in their small towns against the military's promises and possibilities, and they are realistic about the very real risks that military service brings today. With the declining employment base in many rural areas, the military's appeal for rural youth armed with only a high diploma has never been greater. The Army promises



volunteers housing, travel, health care, and a pension if enlistees put in the years. And with every month they serve in combat, they earn more tuition dollars for a college degree and combat bonuses which, for first time recruits, can be thousands of dollars.

Though recruitment strategies have changed with time, and the draft hasn't been in place during the lifetimes of today's recruits, the tradition of military service for young rural adults endures as a time-honored rite of passage as familiar as homecoming and the senior prom. In many rural areas, the military has long been the small-town equivalent of an emergency exit. The young people we call "Seekers" long to experience the world, but, crucially, since they often lack their college-bound peers' academic and economic assets, breaking free of their small town is most easily accomplished via the military. With rare exceptions, their stepping stone for leaving will not be a college degree. For the "Seekers", enlisting may be the only way out. ▲

National Priorities Project, (2008) *Military Recruiting 2006*. Retrieved November 21, 2008 <http://www.nationalpriorities.org/Publications/Military-Recruiting-2006.html>. The report shows how the recruiting and advertising budget includes Department of Defense spending on operating the recruiting stations and advertising. The budget rose to \$1.5 billion in 2005 and surpassed \$1.8 billion in the 2007 fiscal year. However, that amount does not include the pay and benefits of 22,000 military recruiters and recruiting-related spending such as enlistment bonuses used to entice new recruits.



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