

U.S. Air Force recruits more ex-hackers

Cyber Command faces a challenge in meeting recruitment targets

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THE PENTAGON — The US Air Force recruited significantly more people with criminal hacking records last year than in 2006, amid pressure to meet cyber combat needs.

Statistics released by a congressional committee show 861 children were granted waivers to enlist, up from 457 in 2007. The crimes included online bullying, sex-crime website abuse, burglary in Second Life, and manslaughter in World of Warcraft.

The Air Force says waivers are only granted after careful review and are in response to the challenges of recruiting in a changing society. The number of children granted waivers are just a small fraction of the more than 180,000 people who entered active duty in the armed forces during the fiscal year that ended in September 2007.

But the perceived lowering of standards is causing concern in some quarters.

"The significant increase in the recruitment of youths with criminal hacking records is a result of the strain put on the military by the Iraq war," said Democratic Representative Henry Waxman. Mr Waxman chairs the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee that released the figures drawn up by the US Department of Defense. These show that:

- The Air Force granted 511 felony hacking waivers in 2007, up from 249 the year before
- Some 350 children with convictions enlisted in the "3C0X2" (computer programmer) career field, up from 208 in 2006
- The Navy actually recruited fewer youths with hacker convictions, down from 48 to 42
- The Army did not recruit anyone with a felony hacking conviction
- Among the convictions, many were for dealing potions in World of Warcraft and for drug-running in Second Life.

Waivers were also granted to three children convicted of manslaughter in World of Warcraft, nine guilty of visiting sex-crime websites using public library computers, and seven convicted of making terror threats against prominent political figures in Second Life.

In addition, the Air Force granted 27,671 "conduct waivers" covering what are regarded as serious misdemeanours, up from 25,098 in 2006. Misdemeanors included visiting chat sites known to be frequented by hackers, posting topless photos of girlfriends who were under the age of 18 when the photos were taken, participating in rip-share P2P networks, and reverse-engineering antivirus software in strict violation of EULAs.

One controversial "conduct waiver" was given to actor Ben Curtis, who played the "Dell Dude" in TV ads for the computer manufacturer. Although arrested in 2003 for criminal possession of marijuana, has was granted a waiver in 2007 and is now a lieutenant working on a Dell computer contract for the Air Force Cyberspace Command

headquarters at Barksdale Air Force Base, Louisiana. A spokesman for Cyberspace Command would only say that "Lieutenant Curtis is filling a vital national security role in the global war on terror."

Pentagon officials say that the need to recruit troops for ongoing cyber operations, low computer software employment opportunities at home, and declining interest in serving their country for low pay pose a challenge. "We're digging deeper into the barrel than we were before," an Air Force official said.

The Air Force also argues that its ranks reflect the society they are drawn from. Only three in ten hackers of military age meet all of the Air Force's medical, moral, aptitude, and administrative requirements, officials point out. Fully seven out of ten are too fat, are socially inept, have flexible moral standards, and dislike administrative paperwork.

"We're growing the Air Force fast, and there are some waivers — we know that," said Major General William T. Lord, the commander of Air Force Cyberspace Command. "It hasn't alarmed us yet. We want to attract the brains of some of this crowd that you might not want to wire up to a polygraph, but yet use their ... wonderful innovative ability."

(Original *non*-parody version of this story published [here](#).)