



Article

# Military social harm: An agenda for research

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## Abstract

This article presents a critical framework for understanding the harms produced by military institutions. Assessments of military harms are undertaken across the sociological study of the military, ranging from public-facing military issues to more inwardly directed research conducted by entities with vested state interests. Building upon and advancing the available scholarship, we introduce the concept of ‘military social harm’, drawing on criminological perspectives that situate harm in a broader range of social and political contexts. This term serves as a tool to explore the pervasive

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and varied impacts of military activities on society, illustrated through an examination of British military compensation as reparation. This example reveals how compensation regimes weaken a holistic approach to reparation, by undermining elements such as a right to truth or efforts to prevent recurrence. We propose an interdisciplinary research agenda for studying military social harm, aiming to challenge and extend existing scrutiny of military institutions and their accountability mechanisms, thereby engendering a fuller understanding of the direct and indirect costs of retaining and deploying military power.

### **Keywords**

Compensation, critical military studies, military sociology, reparation, social harm

### **Introduction**

We seek to provide an alternative critical consciousness with which to confront the harms caused by military and affiliated institutions, their personnel and practices. While recognition of military institutions as harmful has been diffused across military sociology and cognate disciplines, centring the harms they cause as a main organising feature of critical analysis is lacking from scholarly and political review.

The concept of ‘social harm’ may provide an alternative to this analytical deficit. However, although it has been advanced by some criminologists, arguing for acknowledgement of a wider range of social and political contexts where harms occur (Canning and Tombs, 2021; Hillyard et al., 2004; Pemberton, 2016), such scholarship has largely overlooked military institutions, activities and settings. We mobilise the term ‘military social harm’ as a corrective to this oversight and provide a different instrument of inquiry that permits a deeper understanding of the production and experience of harmful military activity. Through this lens, we use the British military sector<sup>1</sup> as a case study to raise questions of accountability about the harms it accommodates and perpetrates, and to engender a fuller understanding of the direct and indirect costs of retaining and deploying military power. An accounting of the costs and implications of this is essential for the democratic control of the use of force, which relies, in part, on public knowledge and scrutiny of military activity (Forster, 2006). Public support for, and high trust in, militaries is consistently identified across democratic countries (Malešič and Garb, 2024). However, in the United Kingdom, for example, while 80% of the public believe that serving personnel make significant contributions to society, 69% have little idea of what the military does (Royal British Legion (RBL), 2024). This may be explained by an overriding focus on positive messaging about the benefits of military values and veterans for wider society (Caddick, 2024), perceptions of military competence and professionalism among civilians (Feaver, 2024) and military support for civilian emergencies (Gad et al., 2021). In contrast, our focus is on harms as a less common feature of public discourse on armed forces.

First, we outline the problems in existing modes of studying militaries as harmful. Although providing valuable insights into the impact of the military, we identify how these do not enable a more holistic understanding of harm. Second, we set out ‘military

social harm' as a research agenda that enables a more complete identification of the systemic costs of the military and a more comprehensive approach to the identification and evaluation of harm. Third, we illustrate our approach through the example of British military compensation paid as reparation for civilian harm in war. We show that compensation does not account for the full extent of the harms produced by military operations and reveal how compensation itself is complicit in the production of violence it is often used to remedy.

## **The problems of existing approaches to studying militaries as harmful**

For Caforio and Hong (2018: 23), 'a study of military problems is a study of violence', and the task of 'the sociology of the military' is to address the consequences of violence enacted between states, in addition to analysing the internal dynamics of military institutions. Traditional forms of this scholarship include an applied 'engineering model' (Ben-Ari et al., 2021), for example, evaluating problems arising from military service such as the impact of deployment on mental health (Fear et al., 2010), the rates of substance abuse among service leavers (Rhead et al., 2022) or the impact of 'moral injury' (Williamson et al., 2020). Differently, akin to professional military education, an 'enlightenment model' can be understood to address the internal education of military personnel, such as teaching soldiers pre-deployment cultural awareness (Ben-Ari et al., 2021). Together, these models generate evidence to inform policy and play a role in supporting the mitigation of legible harms which are understood to be remediable as 'military problems' (Caforio and Hong, 2018: 213), by military institutions. However, such 'engineering' and 'enlightenment' approaches can overlook how harm results from, or may be integral to, certain practices involved in maintaining and operating militaries (McGarry, 2017). This is because they are 'problem-solving' and do not question the 'general pattern of institutions and relationships' but accept existing conditions, rather than theorise alternatives to them (Cox, 1981: 129).

An emancipatory 'critical sociological model' of addressing military institutions falls broadly into two approaches: 'critical military sociology' and 'critical military studies' (Ben-Ari et al., 2021). The former offers sociological interpretations of military existence (Soeters, 2018), directed towards public interest related to 'military problems', including military violence, diversity, integration, inequality (Caforio and Hong, 2018: 213; Scott et al., 2023), professionalisation, culture and composition (Caforio and Nuciari, 2018). The latter approach addresses issues analogous to 'critical military sociology' (i.e. 'race', gender, inequality, culture, etc.), but instead interrogates them as entrenched problematic institutional, social and cultural issues emanating from military practices (Åhäll, 2016; Bernazzoli and Flint, 2009; McSorley, 2013); the principal audience of which is suggested to be social scientists and academics (Ben-Ari et al., 2021). The most commonly used theoretical framework employed to do this work is 'militarisation'. This concept is broadly understood as a process which both produces, and is produced by, social relations that enable and legitimise war, war-preparedness and the harms they entail. However, this means that a plethora of institutions, identities, behaviours or

modes of production can be ‘militarising’ or militarised (Enloe, 2000) meaning that it is difficult to identify what militarisation is not. As Manchanda (2022: 2) argues, militarisation tends to ‘both clarify and obfuscate’ because it works at such a level of abstraction that the act of identifying perpetrators or vectors of militarised practices inevitably obscures others (see Levy, 2016 on the need for more nuanced accounts of militarisation). For example, such theoretical abstraction can obfuscate the unending violence and militarisation of racial capitalism (Howell, 2018). It can also be a barrier to understanding the harms experienced by certain communities, such as occluding how harm is articulated by military families, potentially alienating them because of the normative (often anti-militarist) commitments underpinning militarisation.

The existing approaches outlined above capture various scholarly ways militaries are exposed to academic scrutiny. While some are more clearly ‘conducive to military effectiveness’ (Soeters, 2018: 203) than others, each do – in their own ways – address issues that either raise questions for militaries about their activities or open up militaries for critique regarding their cultures and practices. There is, therefore, established and fertile ground within existing scholarship to raise critical questions about military establishments and the harms therein and thereby. However, we argue that such existing modes of analysis tend to either reify or obstruct ways of seeing the harms produced by the military sector.

Building upon and extending the existing scholarship, our position is to conceptualise – as a main organising principle of analysis and critique – the problems caused by and experienced within military institutions and contexts as ‘military social harm’. In doing so, we argue this unique approach establishes a novel agenda that forges new ground beyond both problem-solving and totalising understandings of the military through its ability to underscore the structurally modulated experiences of military harm, as well as mapping the interlocking ways in which harms affect a wide range of societal actors, institutions and people.

## **Adopting a military social harm approach to study military contexts**

We argue that the concept of ‘military social harm’ allows us to better identify the systemic costs of the military sector. The concept emanates from criminology and the development of ‘social harm’ within it (Hillyard et al., 2004; Tombs, 2018). Though acknowledging ongoing debates within criminology about the value and use of the concept of ‘social harm’ (Copson, 2018; Kotzé, 2018; Wright, 2023), it is not our intention to intervene in such disciplinary discussions. Instead, we draw inspiration from ‘social harm’ scholarship to advance an alternative conceptual framework for thinking critically about military institutions and contexts.

Social harm has been applied to numerous domains (Canning and Tombs, 2021), but there has been an absence of meaningful engagement with the harms caused by military activity, with a few noticeable exceptions (Salmi, 2004; Ward, 2005; Wilkinson, 2022). Scholars such as Pemberton (2007: 28) have employed the concept as ‘an alternative sociological lens’ through which to explore harms beyond those recognised within the

law that are attributable to the problem of capitalism and its societal impacts on social inequality and well-being (see also Bauman, 2011 use of ‘collateral damage’ to describe the justification of suffering linked to capitalist regimes). Pemberton (2016: 24) describes social harm as:

a shorthand to reflect the relations, processes, flows, practices, discourse, actions and inactions that constitute the fabric of societies which serve to comprise the fulfilment of human needs and in doing so result in identifiable harm.

He suggests this definition allows ‘analyses that compare differing varieties of social formation’ to be studied (Pemberton, 2016: 24); the military sector, we suggest, is one of these ‘social formations’. The value and importance of ‘military social harm’ as a discrete concept is that it acknowledges how other social forces, including, but also beyond, capitalism, are present in the military sector and are implicated in the production of harm in distinctive ways. These include the state system, imperialism and patriarchy, all of which are imbricated, but are not reducible to, capitalism. From social harm scholarship, we take three core insights: The expectation of ‘lawful but awful’ harms; the recognition of harms that are not reducible to direct violence against the individual by discrete agents; and the unsuitability of state and societal institutions to recognise and acknowledge the nature and causes of these harms.

First, the law routinely captures only a small remit of what is widely experienced as harmful (Hillyard and Tombs, 2007). This harmfulness is captured by Veitch’s (2007) discussion of ‘organised irresponsibility’ whereby harms can result from entirely legal practices, such that a victim cannot complain that they have been the subject of transgressive behaviour. Such ‘lawful but awful’ activities include the foreseeable killing of civilians facilitated by the principles of ‘military necessity’ and ‘proportionality’ in International Humanitarian Law (Crawford, 2013), the brutalising effects of military basic training (Gee, 2013) or the correlation between soldiers’ experiences of serious physical and mental health problems and being recruited under the age of 18 (Medact, 2016). Military legislation also creates bespoke ‘crimes’ only pertaining to, and translatable within, the occupational military contexts in which they occur, including offences such as ‘absent without leave’, ‘desertion’ or ‘insubordination’ (Fidell, 2016). These crimes, as well as those that also occur in civilian realms (i.e. murder, sexual assault), may be the product of sexist or racist cultures that persist within military contexts (Herriott et al., 2023). In such cases, the military justice system obscures the process from public scrutiny through formal courts martial or summary punishment by military leadership (White, 2022). Thus, there is less opportunity to expose the complex causes of offences than within more open procedures of civilian courts.

Second, the concept of social harm encourages acknowledgement of a wider range of harms (Canning and Tombs, 2021; Hillyard and Tombs, 2007). The categories established by this scholarship provide some guidance for understanding what ‘military social harm’ constitutes. These include *physical harms beyond those experienced as direct violence* (Hillyard and Tombs, 2007), such as routinised, premature yet foreseeable and preventable deaths (e.g. 2.4 million deaths worldwide resulting from cancers linked to nuclear tests between 1945–1980) (ICAN, 2023).

Harms also extend to *emotional and psychological* harms (Hillyard and Tombs, 2007), such as those resulting from lawful recruitment processes (Child Soldiers International, 2018). It is occasionally acknowledged that transgressive behaviour, such as human rights abuses committed by a soldier, results from mental impairment, fear, stress or fatigue. Yet a social harm perspective raises a concern that the brutalising effect of training 'is potentially traumatizing the soldier before battle and may encourage brutal attitudes and a loss of empathy for enemy civilians' (Crawford, 2013: 248). Psychological harms also include the impact on people, especially children, who are displaced by war or subjected to routine military interventions that disrupt their daily lives (Manzanero et al., 2021).

*Financial and economic harms* refer to processes whereby individuals or communities experience loss of opportunities and basic amenities, or experience higher living costs, as a foreseeable result of economic decisions or malpractice (Hillyard and Tombs, 2007). This is a neglected area, and detailed data and analysis of the economic impact of the military sector is rare (Dorman et al., 2015). It has been shown, however, that military bases can impact availability and pricing in the housing market as well as impacts experienced by former service personnel who struggle to find employment upon leaving service (SQW, 2010).

Harms also extend to *threats to cultural safety* undermining individual autonomy, constraining people's access to opportunities and limiting people's agency to control decisions that influence their personal life (Hillyard and Tombs, 2007). Social harms may also be understood as '*relational*', arising from instrumental social exclusion, and 'harms of misrecognition' namely, the stigmatising, misrepresentation, undermining and exclusion of certain social groups and identities within civic life, and the 'othering' consequences this produces (Pemberton, 2016).

Third, state-led institutions have great difficulty understanding the causes and consequences of these harms or even acknowledging harm at all. Research has consistently shown that mechanisms such as criminal justice processes and public inquiries are ill-suited to provide accountability for structural or systemic harms (Thomas et al., 2024; Williams, 2018). Such institutions are best equipped to hold 'bad apples' to account, rather than 'an organisational entity distinct from the intentions, actions and omissions of one or several concrete individuals' (Hillyard and Tombs, 2007: 13). The varied manifestations of social harm discussed above are not contingent upon 'intent'. They arise from complex processes that perpetuate social injustice yet defy 'the mens rea straitjacket that requires individual blame to be assigned to deliberate miscreants' (Michalowski, 2010: 21).

There are many cases in which traditional accountability measures are deployed to investigate alleged crimes of military personnel. However, investigating these transgressions through a legalistic, individualised process produces what Hearty (2021: 664) describes as 'trigger puller' truth. It has been repeatedly shown, in cases such as atrocities committed by Western soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan or the investigation of historic wrongdoing by the British military in Northern Ireland during The Troubles, that such an individualised approach neglects factors such as aggressive military strategies or environmental factors that increase the likelihood that individual service personnel may transgress the law (Crawford, 2013; Williams, 2018). These can be considered social

harms unacknowledged by formal accountability processes. The result of such framing obscures the institutional accountability of the military for harms experienced within it and harms perpetrated by its personnel and practices.

A legalistic approach also establishes an opposition between those who seek accountability for harm versus those who express sympathy towards military personnel they consider unfairly scapegoated for wider failings (Richards, 2023). For example, in response to public disquiet about recent prosecutions of current and former service personnel, the British Government introduced the Overseas Operations Act 2021 to limit the circumstances under which British soldiers can be prosecuted and address the ‘uniquely challenging context of overseas military operations, and the exceptional demands and stresses to which Her Majesty’s forces are subject on such operations’ [sic] (MoD, 2021). But we argue it is precisely these ‘contexts’ and ‘demands’ that require scrutiny as social harms.

Employing a social harm approach requires analyses of harmful events and actions that are focused upon collective and political accountability and not reductive to individual intent or responsibility (as with ‘crime’). Broadening the remit of critical inquiry and accountability from the individual to the collective,

might more accurately chart instances of mass harm caused by routine practices, Standard Operating Procedures, lines of organisational responsibility and accountability, general modus operandi, cultures of fear, indifference, and thoughtlessness and so on. (Hillyard and Tombs, 2007: 19–20)

As such, social harms are preventable, avoidable, restrict human potential, and derive from complex institutional, national, and international sites of exploitation (Pemberton, 2016). Once such harm is revealed as known or knowable, intervention is possible to modify that which causes harm (Pemberton, 2016). Herein lies the capacity for a different register and accountability to be established.

In short, we are interested in purposefully making visible harms occurring in military contexts that are seldom recognised by legal state orthodoxy (Hillyard and Tombs, 2007). This does not mean overlooking the law and crime, but instead displacing them as the main referents for harm. When considered collectively as a set of harms that are regularly enmeshed in everyday experiences, and from which higher profile ‘crimes’ may arise, military social harms are equally worthy of our attention.

## **Putting military social harm to work**

In the following case study, we put the notion of military social harm to work by interrogating financial compensation for civilians harmed by military action. Although our primary focus is on the British context, it is important to recognise that compensation schemes are widely implemented by militaries in the Global North. Countries like the United States (Keenan and Tracey, 2010) and Australia (McMillan, 2018), for instance, employ similar systems. Such practices are rare outside the Global North, which might suggest that compensation represents a genuine and enlightened effort to address harm. However, as our analysis of the British case reveals, these compensation schemes remain

entrenched within an epistemic framework of international and national law that restricts the recognition of harm and limits state liability. Identifying these limitations underscores the relevance of a 'military social harm' perspective and supports our call for a more comprehensive understanding of the direct and indirect costs associated with maintaining and deploying military power.

Civilians account for 90% of war casualties (UN Security Council, 2022). It is already understood that civilian harm goes beyond physical injuries and property destruction to mental and moral harms, as well as long-lasting effects such as forced displacement and disruption to public services that can severely impact a civilian population (NATO, 2021). There is a well-established international norm that states should provide reparations, but only when the harm constitutes a transgression of international law (United Nations, 2001: 91–94, Article 31). Various international and national sources articulate a holistic approach to reparation, including elements such as a right to truth and a guarantee of non-repetition.<sup>2</sup> But in practice, compensation schemes for civilians undermine these broad goals of reparation, especially the right to truth and the goal of non-repetition. This means compensation can only be sought under limited circumstances and that a range of military social harms go unacknowledged and unaddressed.

The British government has paid £31.8 million in compensation for civilian harm from over 6500 claims in relation to UK military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan (Burke and Lattimer, 2021). These claims were made via the UK-established Area Claims Offices (ACOs) in Iraq and Afghanistan to process public liability payments for losses resulting from the actions of UK military personnel, where the MoD could be held liable under English law. Another avenue for claims against the United Kingdom has been civil litigation. While there are some high-profile instances in which litigants have been awarded compensation for unlawful treatment by UK armed forces, a majority were either rejected or settled (and the details never revealed). Acknowledgement of such harms is also severely limited by the doctrine of combat immunity, under which armed forces are not under a duty of care to avoid causing loss or damage in the 'heat of battle'. Even where such transgressions are identified, victims and family members face numerous barriers that 'undermine any pretension that allegations of systemic serious human rights abuses will be uncovered effectively *through law*' (Williams, 2018: 480, emphasis original). Where legal liability for a violation of law cannot be demonstrated, victims may be denied compensation altogether or paid *ex gratia* payments, a practice encouraged in Iraq and Afghanistan. Instead of focusing on the practical and technical problems of these schemes involving *ex gratia* payments, we draw attention to how such payments obscure and produce military social harm. This occurs in three ways.

First, the *ex gratia* schemes have caused alienation among the very individuals they were meant to assist (Gregory, 2020). This is due to the inconsistent amounts awarded to victims, as well as the complex bureaucratic processes they were required to navigate. There are also clear examples where incidents involving property damage led to higher compensation awards than those for death, including the deaths of children. The British MoD has paid out more compensation for damages to crops or livestock in Cyprus, or vehicle damage in Germany, than for civilian deaths in Afghanistan (Action on Armed Violence, 2021). This raises important questions about whether the UK's



military compensation regime is too reliant on national currency valuations, and ideas and assumptions about nationality, 'race' and local customs.

Second, the schemes were explicitly understood by leaders as a strategic tool to maintain and support the same military operations that produced civilian harm (Burke and Lattimer, 2021). These payments, usually small, are not considered to be reparation. Rather they are justified for operational purposes, such as ensuring the safety of troops ('force protection') and fostering positive relations with local communities through 'hearts and minds' (Silverman, 2020). Bluntly, these 'condolence' payments become a 'weapons system' that augments existing strategies and tactics, rather than form a part of reparation or mechanism of accountability (Gilbert, 2015b: 203). As acts of sympathy rather than an acknowledgement of legal responsibility or fault, the payments demonstrate the military's unwillingness to be publicly accountable for civilian harm produced incidentally to armed conflict or implement substantial changes to their war tactics. The payments create an unjust political economy that encourages recipients to feel indebted to the very military that caused their suffering or loss, allowing the military sector to defer the promise of justice through the giving of gifts (Gilbert, 2015a).

Third, the existence of these payments indicates the widespread presence of harms that are illegible as injuries for which accountability can be sought. Compensation does not necessarily entail an acceptance of wrongdoing, thereby reaffirming the 'acceptability' of foreseeable civilian deaths. As Gilbert (2015a: 404) argues, 'economic accounting does not entail accountability', with no legal liability attached, the payments, 'may actually make possible military impunity for civilian harm, as well as reinforce the international norms of war concerning "collateral damage"'. Here are civilian harms that are difficult to render legible as transgressions of the laws of war at all. For example, Edney and Browne (2019: 1342) has shown how the mere presence of drone surveillance in Afghanistan produces significant harm at a communal level, noting that those 'living under drones are psychologically affected to the extent that they are made to think about how they look to Americans watching them from above and change their movements and behaviours accordingly', resulting in 'surveilled individuals becoming alienated from and devaluing traits and activities previously important to their personal and sociocultural identities'. This broader conception of harm demonstrates how the standard operating practices of armed conflict produce military social harm on a regular and systematic basis.

Seeking reparation via compensation indicates a central blind spot for holding the military sector to account for civilian harm. The compensation regime operates with the epistemic framework that regards civilian harm as foreseeable and permissible when conducted within the rules of International Humanitarian Law. Put differently, the examples above indicate a pattern of harm. Whether through the strict circumstances under which liability for civilian harm can be demonstrated or through condolence payments that are made without acknowledgement of fault, there is no requirement to identify, reduce or seek to avoid the patterns of widespread civilian harm that are a foreseeable outcome of armed conflict under the laws of war (Crawford, 2013).

It has long been argued that the political and military establishment has 'sought to ensure that all non-combatants who die in the course of these so-called "humanitarian wars" are portrayed as doing so 'accidentally' (Owens, 2003: 596). If not, then they

must be accepted as victims of war crimes. The laws of war are the epistemic register of harm that supports this strictly bifurcated portrayal. A study of compensation as reparation demonstrates this register at work through a false, or perhaps unduly constraining, distinction of legibility for harms: either harms are *recognised* as transgressive for which accountability can be sought (e.g. violations of the laws of war), or harms are *rejected* as transgressive (e.g. where injury was not intended nor disproportionate). Employing a military social harm approach reveals how the practice of seeking and awarding compensation in the context of military activity, serves to undermine these broad goals of reparation, especially the right to truth and the goal of non-repetition. This problem of legibility flows from the prefigured categories of victimisation upon which formalised accountability processes rely. As Furtado (2023: 7–8) notes, the very possibility of being recognised as a victim is ‘indissociable from the inscription of their suffering into the Law (the recognised language of political order), as unacceptable and culpable violence’. More specifically, the law polices the recognition of victimhood temporally and spatially, prosecuting acts in discrete moments, events and conflict zones, and through individualism, in seeking to identify a specific agent’s (in)action as the source of harm. Such framing challenges our ability to recognise the harms discussed above. Rather than doom accountability-seeking, however, this highlights the need for reparation and truth-seeking to start from a position of epistemological pluralism and inclusivity if it is to be meaningful (Williams, 2023).

From this case study, sensitivity to military social harm reveals how compensation does not simply obscure accountability for civilian harm but also reaffirms the social practices of ‘just war’ and a violent military that produces harm. Compensation regimes are not even a partial fulfilment of reparation but serve to undermine elements such as a right to truth or efforts to prevent recurrence, to the detriment of understanding the damage and problems of war. It is a specific instance of, as Johnson (2017: 713) describes, ‘a hierarchy of death and injury in which particular bodies are highlighted as problematic, while others are marginalised and silenced’. If reparation is expanded to include aspects such as a right to truth, as noted above, then such truth-seeking would need to examine the systemic nature of military harm both within and outside the war context.

## Expanding an agenda for military social harm

Our discussion – informed and guided by a social harms approach – highlights that military operations actually lead to an escalation of, rather than protection from, military-perpetrated harm. But the central ethos of our argument is applicable beyond the case study above.

A military social harm approach can enhance understanding and scrutiny of the trend towards ‘low carbon warfare’, ‘green militaries’ and ‘net zero defence’ (Depledge, 2023). It is well understood that militaries contribute to and are complicit in various environmental harms, despite recurrent problems with accurate reporting (Parkinson, 2020). States are now pursuing agendas to reduce carbon emissions and environmental impact. For example, NATO members are experimenting with modular nuclear reactors and deep-drill geothermal technology to replace fossil fuels (Milburn, 2023). Scrutiny of both the existing impact – the so-called ‘carbon footprint’ – and these reform agendas is

essential to address the human security implications of climate change (McDonald, 2024: 206). Alongside a well-documented history of militaries adopting new practices with harmful side effects (Vogler, 2024), similar risks are posed by new agendas for low-carbon militaries and can be better understood through an expansive approach to harm. A further complexity is that the military is often the institution to which the state turns to alleviate the impacts of climate change. Beyond disaster response, these practices include supporting conservation operations to protect carbon sinks and ecosystems and preventing illegal wildlife trade using ‘low-intensity COIN’ techniques (Milburn, 2023: 35–39). Scholars warn that military responses to climate change may be counterproductive, perpetuating the use of militaries to address climate change impacts and rendering the costs of low-carbon warfare invisible or unimportant (Depledge, 2023: 684). Political ecology and decolonial approaches consistently show that such force can reproduce inequalities (Vogler, 2024). A military social harm approach is a tool to address these risks, ensuring that the full costs of military force, including the impacts of measures taken to decarbonise, are considered.

Our approach also generates insights to understand and address the systemic issues surrounding sexual and gender-based violence within militaries. Recent scholarship has demonstrated that while a zero-tolerance approach is widely claimed by Western militaries, in practice, there exists a hypermasculine culture that not only tolerates but perpetuates gender-based violence, entrenches gender discrimination and normalises sexual harassment. There is often a failure to recognise forms of suffering, which makes it difficult for victims to seek justice and impedes systemic change (Bourke, 2022; Taber, 2020). For example, the persistent allegations of bullying, sexual harassment and assault within the United Kingdom armed forces (Service Complaints Ombudsman for the Armed Forces, 2022) have so far failed to produce a clear institutional commitment to research, inquire into and understand the nature and scope of the resulting harms. Narratives surrounding military sexual violence have been described as a form of ‘institutional gaslighting’ that not only denies harm, but also creates further harm by rendering ‘entire communities and their experiences irrelevant and disregarded’ (MacKenzie, 2023: 11). The Centre for Military Justice, a non-governmental organization (NGO) that provides advice, advocacy and representation to service personnel affected by bullying, harassment, discrimination or violence, has called for research that can ‘take seriously the response to sexual violence’ as part of a misogynistic gender culture that contributes to and causes harm, and prevents servicewomen from speaking out about sexual harm (Gray et al., 2023: 79). This requires methodological and epistemological reflexivity towards the institutions and processes used to scrutinise the military sector. As discussed above, a military social harm approach provides the tools to acknowledge a wider range of harms that are otherwise overlooked. For instance, both ‘threats to safety’ and ‘relational harms’ (Pemberton, 2016) are evident in the experiences of servicewomen who have reported sexual violence or sexual harassment perpetrated by other members of the military and subsequently face significant cultural barriers, including humiliation, disbelief, blame, shame, isolation and ostracisation. Yet these are overlooked by existing systems tasked with supporting victims and providing accountability, exacerbating the trauma experienced by victims.

In all these cases, our underlying point is that a ‘social harm’ approach foregrounds the need to resist power and challenge the knowledge that protects social and political institutions from public and academic scrutiny (Hillyard and Tombs, 2007). It also requires an assessment of indifference – individual and collective, public and private, domestic and international – to harms and harmful institutions that ought to be squarely in the civic domain (Pemberton, 2007), such as the military sector. The value of this research is to demonstrate harms that are preventable or foreseeable consequences of existing policy-making choices and political, corporate or social (in)action. This opens up opportunities to consider whether less harmful approaches were then, or are now, possible (Pemberton, 2016). Political actors, and the militaries that serve them, can therefore be held more fully accountable for the consequences of their policies and practices.

## Conclusion

Our central argument has presented a conceptual framework that illuminates the many harms caused by military entities and within military contexts. The value of a focus on military social harm is its greater potential for democratic oversight in that it provides a fuller exposition of the costs and implications of military practices and raises further questions of accountability regarding what occurs within military spaces. Building on, and advancing, existing indirect acknowledgement of harms occurring in military contexts (e.g. Levy, 2023), ‘military social harm’ is a theoretical scaffold that allows for harms occurring within, and accommodated by, militaries to be better understood beyond existing concepts such as ‘militarism’ and ‘militarisation’. These concepts, we maintain, are often unintentionally totalising and polarising. A military social harm approach acknowledges that the military sector may attenuate harms such as poverty, to some extent, since it provides shelter, food and work. Indeed, it is one of the few institutions that can offer this. However, such provisions also obscure harms of military service: access to improved rights and enhanced welfare is contingent upon the willingness to engage in warfare, and the harms experienced therein (Cowan, 2008). Through a military social harm approach, it becomes possible to simultaneously critique the military and society’s interconnected politics of disposability (Basham, 2018), that is, how militaries exploit those in need of shelter, food and work, *and* how societies fail to meet these needs and produce the harms that militaries exploit.

In conclusion, we argue this research agenda should be pursued in three specific ways. First, by developing a robust agenda of research methods. As observed (Thomas et al., 2024; Williams, 2023) there is a need for greater methodological pluralism and reflexivity, both by the academy and state-sponsored accountability apparatus (such as official investigations and inquiries), to acknowledge a wider range of military harms and their causes. Improved accountability of any military sector requires qualitative and quantitative, positivist and post-positivist, social scientific and aesthetic approaches to understand the complex intersectionalities of gender, sexuality, ‘race’ and racism, colonialism, class and disability that generate military social harm.

Second, a military social harm approach can be ‘bottom-up’, without engaging with the ‘military-academy research nexus’ (Jenkins et al., 2011). By this, we mean funded collaborative work between universities and the state or the autocratic systems and processes that govern such research as contributions to the ‘knowledge economy’ (Catignani

and Basham, 2021). Thus, we decentre the military in the research process so that the military sector is repositioned as the ‘object of study’ (Hillyard and Tombs, 2007: 22–23), rather than the arbiter of its own critique. This should not be misinterpreted as abandoning all stakeholders within a military sector’s orbit. As noted by Pemberton (2007), adopting a social harms approach will outline policy-based alternatives that ‘contradict’ and ‘compete’ with current social systems and institutions that perpetuate social harms. To this end, a wider range of stakeholders must be engaged (both central and peripheral) that represent the methodological diversity described above. These stakeholders include policy-makers, NGOs, military families, and independent oversight bodies, many of which are already engaged in research that deploys, mirrors or complements a social harm approach. Engaging with such a diverse group in practical ways opens up new avenues for accountability of the military sector on a national and international scale.

Finally, it follows that for this agenda to succeed, research funding is required that is not curtailed by the dictates of defence or security institutions (Woodward et al., 2020). Restating Hillyard et al.’s (2004) expression, if a research agenda aiming to ‘take military social harms seriously’ is to succeed, it will require institutional support brave enough to ask uncomfortable questions about military institutions, personnel, their practices and activities.

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## Notes

1. This allows us to demonstrate the efficacy of ‘military social harm’ at its conception, via a detailed analysis of one focused example. Furthermore, our definition of the military sector is just one way of conceptualising the complex range of actors and blurred relationships that enable militaries.
2. The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) acknowledged the right to know the truth about atrocities (van Noorloos, 2021), to complement customary rules of International Humanitarian Law (ICRC, 2005, Rule 158). Legal decisions on allegations of unlawful killing and ill-treatment against the British military in Iraq have recognised that such a right applies extra-jurisdictionally (Rights and Security International, 2007).

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## Résumé

Cet article offre un cadre critique pour comprendre les préjudices produits par les institutions militaires. Les évaluations des préjudices militaires sont réalisées dans le cadre de l'étude sociologique des forces armées, qu'il s'agisse de questions militaires accessibles au public ou de recherches plus internes menées par des entités qui ont des intérêts étatiques particuliers. Dans le prolongement des travaux disponibles, nous cherchons à aller plus loin en introduisant le concept de « préjudice social militaire », en nous inspirant des analyses criminologiques qui situent le préjudice dans un éventail plus large de contextes sociaux et politiques. Ce concept sert d'outil pour explorer les répercussions, généralisées et variées, des activités militaires sur la société, illustrées à travers une analyse de l'indemnisation militaire britannique en tant que réparation. Cet exemple révèle comment les régimes d'indemnisation compromettent une approche holistique de la réparation, en mettant à mal des éléments tels que le droit à la vérité ou les efforts visant à prévenir la récurrence. Nous proposons un programme de recherche interdisciplinaire pour étudier le préjudice social militaire, avec l'objectif de remettre en question et d'étendre l'examen actuel des institutions militaires et de leurs mécanismes de responsabilité, de manière à apporter une compréhension plus approfondie des coûts directs et indirects du maintien et du déploiement de la puissance militaire.

## Mots-clés

études militaires critiques, indemnisation, préjudice social, réparation, sociologie militaire

**Resumen**

Este artículo presenta un marco crítico para comprender los daños producidos por las instituciones militares. Las evaluaciones del daño militar están presentes a través del estudio sociológico de las fuerzas armadas, que abarca desde cuestiones militares públicamente visibles hasta investigaciones más dirigidas hacia el interior realizadas por entidades con intereses estatales establecidos. Tomando como punto de partida la investigación previa y con el fin de avanzar en ella, se presenta el concepto de 'daño social militar', a partir de perspectivas criminológicas que sitúan el daño en una gama más amplia de contextos sociales y políticos. Este término sirve como herramienta para explorar los impactos generalizados y variados de las actividades militares en la sociedad, ilustrados a través de un análisis de la compensación militar británica como reparación. Este ejemplo revela cómo los regímenes de compensación debilitan un enfoque holístico de la reparación, al socavar elementos como el derecho a la verdad o los esfuerzos para prevenir la recurrencia. Se propone una agenda de investigación interdisciplinaria para estudiar el daño social militar, con el objetivo de cuestionar y ampliar el escrutinio existente de las instituciones militares y sus mecanismos de rendición de cuentas, generando así una comprensión más completa de los costes directos e indirectos de mantener y desplegar el poder militar.

**Palabras clave**

compensación, daño social, estudios militares críticos, reparación, sociología militar