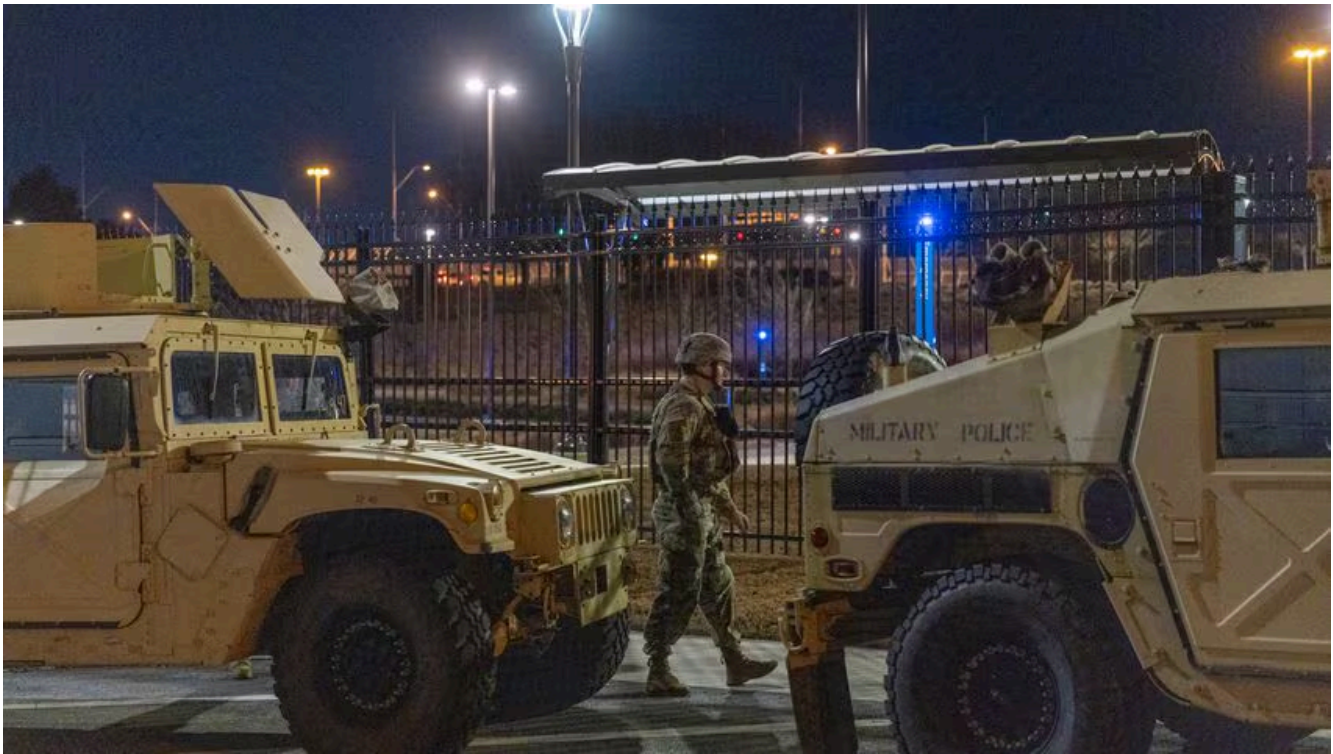


# National Guard recruiters target metro Atlanta high schoolers' phones



Credit: arvin.temkar@ajc.com

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The Georgia National Guard is using geolocation technology to send recruitment ads to phones near high schools. The Guard on standby near the Georgia Capitol on Friday, Jan. 27, 2023. (Arvin Temkar / arvin.temkar@ajc.com)

Children in metro Atlanta may be seeing solicitations on their phones to join the Georgia National Guard now that the military force is beaming ads to people near many high schools.

The Guard is using geolocation to reach smartphones within a mile of 67 metro Atlanta high schools. The goal is to reach “military age” individuals and their parents, teachers and counselors. But the technology doesn’t discriminate by age, so younger high school students as well as kids at nearby elementary and middle schools could also be targeted.

The potential to circumvent parents in the messaging around such a weighty decision riled critics when news of the ad campaign was [published by The Intercept](#), a national news outlet.

The Intercept notes that the Guard is targeting social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, streaming television, and music apps but not TikTok, which is banned for official Department of Defense use.

The [contract solicitation](#) seeks to “geographically target and retarget individuals,” delivering at least 3.5 million ad views by Sept. 30.

A [related Q&A document](#) says the Guard would consider ideas for retargeting high school students after school hours when they are at home.

A state National Guard spokeswoman told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution that the contract was awarded in early April. She said it was the Georgia Guard's first use of the technology as far as recruiters who are currently there know.

[Government records](#) say the contract, for \$470,783.78, went to New Jersey-based [Park Circle Technologies](#). The CEO and founder, Ranjeeta Nanda, had no comment about whether the campaign could avoid targeting children's phones. She referred questions to the Guard.

The one-year contract can be extended by four years if enough people click on the ads.

The ACLU of Georgia says the new campaign doesn't pass the "sniff" test for propriety.

Under federal law, schools must give [student phone numbers to the military](#), though parents can opt their children out of the disclosure. This new technique could allow the messaging to bypass parents, said Ben Lynde, an ACLU lawyer, who wondered if the lack of discrimination by age "is not a bug, it's a feature."

Absent a parental filter, younger kids may be more apt to be sold on the idea, and thus more likely to sign up when they are old enough, he said.

Kids who sign on at age 17, as Lynde said he did, can fail to appreciate how they are waiving their civil liberties — and how they will become subject to the Uniform Code of Military Justice.

He said he became determined to join after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks during his high school freshman year.

"It's a huge decision," Lynde said. "And you don't have a choice in what happens at that point."

The adjutant general of the Georgia National Guard dismissed criticism of the new strategy, saying it would be a dereliction of duty not to harness the technology.

"Unless somebody's got their tinfoil hat on too tight, we don't hear a whole lot about this," Maj. Gen. Thomas Carden Jr. said. High school students are its "target market," said Carden, who said he signed on at age 17. But no one under 18 can join without a parent's signature, he said.

The general said he has only 133 recruiter positions in a state with 159 counties. This technology is more efficient and, unlike with older methods, allows the Guard to track the effectiveness of its ad spend, Carden said.

He noted that the military already advertises in many places where parents might not be present, on billboards or in movie theaters.

The military is encountering recruiting challenges. A crisis, some say. The U.S. Army, for example, fell 15,000 short of its 60,000 recruiting target last year, [according to Military.com](#). About 7 in 10 youths do not qualify for military service because of obesity, physical and mental health problems, and other issues, according to [Army data](#).

The AJC reviewed an [exhibit to the contract](#) that was published by The Intercept and found that all 67 targeted high schools are in metro Atlanta, the bulk of them in Cobb, DeKalb, Fulton and Gwinnett counties. Sixteen of them were in Fulton County — two within Atlanta Public Schools and 14 in Fulton County Schools.

A Fulton schools spokeswoman said the district gives the military the student contact information they have on record “with appropriate coordination.” She added that the district was uninvolved with this advertising campaign “through private devices.”

Carden said the Guard targeted the metro area because it was the most cost-effective strategy, with so many students in such a relatively small portion of the state.

The military already advertises on YouTube, on social media and on “every platform” that is legal and ethical, Carden said. “That’s kind of the litmus test: Is it legal, is it moral, is it ethical, is it not stupid? Will we get a return on investment?”

The Guard must meet the warriors of the future where they are today, he said. “And where they are is on their phones.”