For Ana Grady Flores, a third-generation activist who grew up in a radical, Catholic Worker household, the decision to become politically involved was made in her early teens. While many of her peers were still playing Pokémon, she remembers her moment of clarity: “I wasn’t going to be like an ordinary teenager.” Ana’s political coming-of-age coincided with the run-up to the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. In an interview for Rosalie Riegle’s book, Doing Time for Peace, Ana said in 2002 she began organizing her high school classmates against the looming war. “The young people have to be the ones to say no. We can’t vote yet, so we have no voice.” Finding a way to make an impact became an all-consuming passion, and led to her decision the following year to join others in “occupying” a Marine recruiting station in her hometown of Ithaca, New York. Splattered with red paint, Ana and a dozen friends from school pinned the names and pictures of dead Iraqi children on their clothes before entering the center. Some shouted, “We’re here to recruit you to the peace movement!” before lying down en masse in the lobby. This symbolic “die-in” continued until police arrived to haul away the protesters.1

While Ana was willing to put her body on the line, few people have the courage to face arrest and deal with the consequences. For others, the symbolic picket line or demonstration offers an appealing and more accessible mode of political action. During the Iraq War, picketing in front of military recruiting stations was a popular form of protest. Beginning in 2007, Seattle activists held semi-weekly demonstrations outside several military recruiting centers. One in particular, a combined Army-Navy recruiting station at 23rd and Jackson, was located in close proximity to a historically African American high school. Some protesters aimed their anger at the way recruiters targeted the Black community. In November of that year, youth from Seattle-area high schools and colleges marched—without a permit—to the recruiting station. Faced with a police barricade, they shouted slogans like, “Hey recruiters, we’re no fools! Get your lies out of our schools!”
The recruiting center was the scene of repeated protest in subsequent years. While the Seattle chapter of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) initially organized these actions, they received support from a broad cross section of the community. Kathy Barker, an activist who at the time had children in the Seattle schools, went to more than a dozen of these demonstrations during the Iraq War. Framing her reasons for protesting military recruitment in moral terms, Kathy told us she wanted to do something to counteract the “stunningly militaristic US society” that permitted “recruiters in the schools all day long.” Allowing the military to recruit schoolchildren, she said, “goes to the heart of who we are as Americans, as human beings.”

Kathy usually heard about upcoming actions from an e-mail sent by her neighborhood peace group. Protesters included members of Veterans for Peace, Sound Non-violent Opponents of War (a city-wide peace group), and Youth Against War and Racism (a regional network of student activists). The local contingent of the Raging Grannies also participated, and entertained fellow protesters by wearing costumes and performing anti-war skits. As Kathy told us years later, a regular presence at 23rd and Jackson inevitably led to interesting encounters with recruiters. “I once walked past and one of the Army recruiters I recognized from high schools was coming out of the recruiting station. It was summer, so I shouted, ‘Must be tough with school closed, huh?’ And he smiled and said, ‘No, I just hang around at the playgrounds’.”

As the Iraq War began winding down and the Army’s budget shrank, the recruiting station was one of many to shut its doors for good. Activists who attended various protests justifiably take some credit for the closure. Such activities illustrate the approach to counter-recruitment we label an anti-war organizing strategy. Military recruiting stations are symbolic sites of resistance to US foreign policy, and some may reasonably choose to make those locations a forum for speaking out against war and militarism. But this aspect of counter-recruitment goes beyond mere symbolism, and can extend into activists’ school outreach work. Military recruiters have annual quotas to fill. If counter-recruiters can make it harder to attract new soldiers—by convincing students not to enlist—they believe they can undermine US attempts to intervene with military force around the globe.

This type of activism carries a certain appeal, since it may appear more effective than participation in traditional anti-war tactics like rallies and marches. If done effectively and at a large enough scale, some have claimed, counter-recruitment has more potential to end war. In an article from 2006, San Diego organizer Rick Jahnkow suggested policy makers can easily ignore “antiwar demonstrations and other symbolic forms of protest,” but they “cannot ignore the fact that without enough soldiers, it is impossible to sustain a