

BACKGROUND

No. 3282 | FEBRUARY 13, 2018

The Looming National Security Crisis: Young Americans Unable to Serve in the Military

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Abstract

The military depends on a constant flow of volunteers every year. According to 2017 Pentagon data, 71 percent of young Americans between 17 and 24 are ineligible to serve in the United States military. Put another way: Over 24 million of the 34 million people of that age group cannot join the armed forces—even if they wanted to. This is an alarming situation that threatens the country's fundamental national security. If only 29 percent of the nation's young adults are qualified to serve, and if this trend continues, it is inevitable that the U.S. military will suffer from a lack of manpower. A manpower shortage in the United States Armed Forces directly compromises national security.

According to 2017 Pentagon data, 71 percent of young Americans between 17 and 24 are ineligible to serve in the United States military.¹ Put another way: Over 24 million of the 34 million people of that age group cannot join the armed forces—even if they wanted to. This is an alarming situation which threatens the country's fundamental national security. If only 29 percent of the nation's young adults are even qualified to serve, and these negative trends continue, it is inevitable that the U.S. military will suffer from a lack of manpower.

The military depends on a constant flow of volunteers every year to meet its requirements, and as the number of eligible Americans declines, it will be increasingly difficult to meet the needs. This is not a distant problem to address decades from now. The U.S. military is already having a hard time attracting enough qualified volunteers. Of the four services, the Army has the greatest annual need. The Army anticipates problems with meeting its 2018 goal to enlist

KEY POINTS

- A manpower shortage in the United States military directly compromises national security. Today, 71 percent of young Americans between 17 and 24 are ineligible to serve in the military—that is 24 million of the 34 million people of that age group.
- More and more young Americans do not qualify to enter the military due to lack of basic education, drug use, criminal background, or—the top reason—simply being too fat.
- The U.S. government should initiate an integrated and comprehensive public awareness and advocacy program to promote awareness of the problem of the inability of young Americans to qualify for basic military service.
- Education is paramount. Empowering parents to access learning options that work for their children early on increases graduation rates, decreases crime, and encourages healthy lifestyles, and should be a priority for lawmakers, educators, parents, and all citizens.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/bg3282>

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80,000 qualified volunteers, even with increased bonuses and incentives.²

Even more than on planes, ships, and tanks, the military depends on ready and willing American volunteers to protect this nation. In a recent panel discussion on this looming crisis, Army Major General Malcolm Frost, the commander of the Army's Initial Military Training Command said, "I would argue that the next existential threat we have...is the inability to man our military."³ In 2009, a group of retired U.S. generals and admirals formed a nonprofit group "Mission: Readiness"⁴ to draw attention to this growing problem. In their report "Ready, Willing, and Unable to Serve,"⁵ they report that the main causes of this situation are inadequate education, criminality, and obesity. Unchecked, the combined effect of these three conditions will continue to decrease the number of young adults eligible to serve in the United States military.

The issue of growing ineligibility for military service among America's youth must be a national priority. The former commander of the Marine Corps Recruiting Command, Major General Mark Brilakis, says, "There are 30 some million 17- to 24 year-olds out there, but by the time you get all the way down to those that are qualified, you're down to less than a million young Americans."⁶ A manpower shortage in the United States military directly compromises national security. America needs a strong military

to defend its national interests, and that military depends on qualified volunteers. As the most recent U.S. National Security Strategy makes clear, the "United States faces an extraordinarily dangerous world, filled with a wide range of threats that have intensified in recent years."⁷

Greater numbers of Americans could be available if the military lowered its standards, but this would also arguably put the nation's defense at risk since the caliber among service members would be reduced, harming a qualitative factor that has always represented a competitive advantage of the U.S. military. Reinforcing this point, the Army's current Recruiting commander, Major General Jeffrey Snow, said: "We don't want to sacrifice quality. If we lower the quality, yes we might be able to make our mission, but that's not good for the organization. The American public has come to expect a qualified Army that can defend the nation." He adds, "I don't think the American public would like us to lower the quality of those joining the Army if they knew it's going to impact our ability to perform the very functions our nation expects us to do."⁸

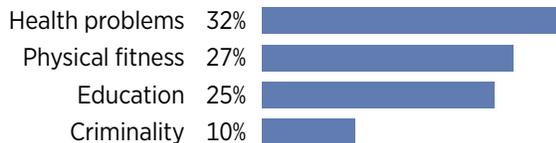
This same sentiment applies to the other branches as well. "This is not just an Army problem," seconds retired Lieutenant General John Bednarek, "It's not even a joint problem of all the services. This is a national issue tied to the security of the United States of America."⁹ Thus, the remedy to this nation-

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1. Nolan Feeny, "Pentagon: 7 in 10 Youths Would Fail to Qualify for Military Service," *Time*, June 2014, <http://time.com/2938158/youth-fail-to-qualify-military-service/> (accessed January 4, 2018), and e-mail correspondence between the author and Jamie Lockhart, acting director of Mission: Readiness, on December 11, 2017.
 2. Jared Serbu, "After Years of Drawdowns, Army Needs 80,000 New Soldiers to Meet 2018 Growth Targets," Federal News Radio, October 18, 2017, <https://federalnewsradio.com/on-dod/2017/10/after-years-of-drawdowns-army-needs-80000-new-soldiers-to-meet-2018-growth-targets/> (accessed January 4, 2018).
 3. General Malcolm Frost, "A Looming National Security Crisis: Young Americans Unable to Join the Military," panel discussion co-hosted by The Heritage Foundation and Mission: Readiness, October 12, 2017, video, <http://www.heritage.org/defense/event/looming-national-security-crisis-young-americans-unable-join-the-military>.
 4. Mission: Readiness Is Part of the Nonprofit Council for a Strong America, <https://www.strongnation.org/> (accessed January 26, 2018).
 5. Mission: Readiness, "Ready, Willing, and Unable to Serve," undated, <http://cdn.missionreadiness.org/NATEE1109.pdf> (accessed January 26, 2018).
 6. Jared Serbu, "After Banner Year for Recruiting, Military Leaders Uneasy About Future," Federal News Radio, January 17, 2014, <https://federalnewsradio.com/defense/2014/01/after-banner-year-for-recruiting-military-leaders-uneasy-about-future/> (accessed January 4, 2018).
 7. President Donald Trump, "National Security Strategy of the United States of America," The White House, December 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf> (accessed January 12, 2018).
 8. Emily Balli, "General: Army Struggles to Meet Goal of 80,000 Recruits," *USA Today*, December 2016, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2016/12/01/general-army-struggles-meet-goal-80000-recruits/94757310/> (accessed January 4, 2018).
 9. Lt. General John Bednarek, "A Looming National Security Crisis: Young Americans Unable to Join the Military," panel discussion co-hosted by The Heritage Foundation and Mission: Readiness, video, October 12, 2017, <http://www.heritage.org/defense/event/looming-national-security-crisis-young-americans-unable-join-the-military>.

CHART 1

Unable to Serve

About 75 percent of Americans ages 17–24 would not be able to join the military. Of those, here are the four largest reasons:



NOTE: Individuals may be rejected for more than one reason.

SOURCE: Mission: Readiness, “Ready, Willing, and Unable to Serve,” 2009, <http://cdn.missionreadiness.org/MR-Ready-Willing-Unable.pdf> (accessed December 7, 2017).

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al dilemma must be to address those staggering numbers who do not qualify, and put in place programs to reverse these trends.

Education

To join the armed forces, the military across all branches requires that an individual have a high school diploma or a General Equivalency Diploma (GED). This qualification ensures that recruits possess a minimum level of education, a basic understanding of written and cognitive skills, and enough “stick-to-itiveness” to complete an organized program. This basic standard eliminates far too many young Americans from being able to serve. Though comparable ineligibility statistics from past years do

not exist (the military only recently started calculating ineligibility percentages), “experts said seniors graduating from high school [in 2014] face[d] the longest odds to qualify for military service since the draft was abolished in 1973.”¹⁰

Despite the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reporting that in the 2014–2015 school year, “the adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) for public high school students rose to 83 percent,”¹¹ dropout expert Julian Vasquez Heilig says that “the only people who believe it’s [over] 80 percent are probably the politicians who are telling us that.”¹² In addition to other shortcomings, this statistic from the NCES does not account for lowered graduation standards, incomplete data, or the students who transferred to other programs (typically those most at risk of not graduating).¹³

Graduation rates reported by major U.S. cities tell a more accurate and depressing story, with places like Montgomery, Alabama, reporting 70.7 percent and Albany, Oregon, as low as 51.3 percent.¹⁴ Chicago, Illinois, measures its graduation rate based on a five-year program, and as of 2016 was only at 73.5 percent.¹⁵ For those who do not complete high school, the military accepts a certain number of recruits who have received their GED, but these individuals rarely pass the Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT). Among other things, the AFQT measures recruits’ math and reading skills upon application to the military. Young Americans’ inability to meet education qualifications highlights underlying issues in America’s educational foundations, with national consequences.

Some point to expanding pre-kindergarten programs (pre-K) as a possible solution to improving

10. Miriam Jordan, “Recruits’ Ineligibility Tests the Military: More than Two-Thirds of American Youth Wouldn’t Qualify for Service, Pentagon Says,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 27, 2014, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/recruits-ineligibility-tests-the-military-1403909945> (accessed January 29, 2018).

11. National Center for Education Statistics, “The Condition of Education; Public High School Graduation Rates,” updated April 2017, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_coi.asp (accessed January 4, 2018).

12. Lance Izumi, “Fake Achievement: The Rising High School Graduation Rate,” *2017 Index of Culture and Opportunity* (Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation, 2017), <http://www.heritage.org/2017-index-culture-and-opportunity/fake-achievement-the-rising-high-school-graduation-rate>.

13. Valerie Strauss, “U.S. High School Graduation Rate Is Up—But there’s a Warning Label Attached,” *The Washington Post*, October 27, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2016/10/27/u-s-high-school-graduation-rate-is-up-but-theres-a-warning-label-attached/?utm_term=.07144ab6e641 (accessed January 4, 2018).

14. Steven Peters, “Cities Where the Most (and Least) People Graduate High School,” *24/7 Wall St*, July 18, 2016, <http://247wallst.com/special-report/2016/07/18/cities-where-the-most-and-least-people-graduate-high-school/6/> (accessed January 4, 2018).

15. Juan Perez Jr. and Kyle Bentle, “Data: Chicago Public Schools Touts Improved Graduation Rate,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 5, 2016, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-chicago-schools-graduation-rates-20160905-1.htmlstory.html> (accessed January 4, 2018).

high school graduation rates and education in general. While some studies have indicated that there are short-term benefits to increasing the amount of pre-K programs and enrollments, studies proving longer-term benefits, especially extending into high school, are inconclusive. As Dr. Grover Whitehurst, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, and a noted education expert puts it: “Not one of the [pre-K] studies that has suggested long-term positive impacts of center-based early childhood programs has been based on a well-implemented and appropriately analyzed randomized trial, and nearly all have serious limitations in external validity.”¹⁶

There are some options that have shown positive outcomes. One is the re-conceptualization of public education to empower families to choose schools and learning options that fit the unique needs of their children. Other proven options include states, school boards, administrators, teachers, and politicians all working together to promote an environment of quality learning from the earliest stages of academic development. The American Institutes for Research suggest the characteristics of such programs include small class sizes, supportive teacher relationships, engaging curricula, and high student expectations, among others.¹⁷ These improvements to the educational system would not only make for brighter young Americans, but would ensure that more continue their education and complete high school.

Research increasingly supports instituting school choice as a means of improving educational achievement and graduation rates. When parents have the freedom to select schools that are the right fit for their children, competition keeps schools at their best, and students do better and stay longer in the settings best suited for them. To date, researchers have conducted 17 randomized control trial (RCT)

evaluations of the impact of school choice on students’ academic achievement. Eleven of those evaluations found positive effects for participants, four found null effects, and two found negative effects. However, evidence suggests that the negative effects may have been due to the uniquely strict regulatory environment in which these programs operated. Critically, three RCTs have been conducted examining the effect of school choice on academic attainment—graduation rates—and all find statistically significant positive effects as a result of school choice. Most notably, one of the three—a study by Wolf and colleagues in 2013—concluded that the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program, a voucher program operating in Washington, DC, for low-income children, “increased the likelihood of a student’s graduation by 21 percentage points, from 70% to 91%.”¹⁸ In addition to vouchers and tax credit scholarships, education saving accounts (ESAs) allow parents to use most of the tax funding their local public schools receive (the state per pupil amount spent on their child in his district school) and put it toward the best educational service, product, or provider for their child, be that private school, online courses, a tutor, home-school curricula, or another educational option. This “empowers parents with a much greater ability to customize their child’s education.”¹⁹ These two forms of education choice cultivate what American economist Milton Friedman once called “a system of free choice...a system of competition, innovation, which would change the character of education.”²⁰

Another proven way to improve educational outcomes is for states and districts to improve the management of their school programs. Florida, under then-Governor Jeb Bush’s leadership, provides an example of success, which has been referred to as the “Florida Formula.” The Florida Formula includes pro-

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16. Grover J. Whitehurst, “Does Pre-K work? It Depends How Picky You Are,” Brookings Institution, February 26, 2014, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/does-pre-k-work-it-depends-how-picky-you-are/> (accessed January 4, 2018).
 17. Stacey Rosenkrantz Aronson, “Successful Program Characteristics,” American Institutes for Research, December 1995, <http://www.sedl.org/policy/insights/n06/3.html> (accessed January 4, 2018).
 18. Anna J. Egalite and Patrick J. Wolf, “A Review of the Empirical Research on Private School Choice,” *Peabody Journal of Education*, Vol. 91, No. 4 (June 29, 2016), <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0161956X.2016.1207436?scroll=top&needAccess=true&> (accessed January 4, 2018).
 19. Jason Bedrick and Lindsey M. Burke, “Recalibrating Accountability: Education Savings Accounts as Vehicles of Choice and Innovation,” The Heritage Foundation and the Texas Public Policy Foundation *Special Report* No. 190, December 12, 2016, <http://www.heritage.org/education/report/recalibrating-accountability-education-savings-accounts-vehicles-choice-and>.
 20. Milton Friedman, “Our Legacy,” *EdChoice*, <https://www.edchoice.org/who-we-are/our-legacy/the-friedmans-on-school-choice/> (accessed January 4, 2018).
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viding a measure of school choice, holding schools accountable, finding quality educators, and setting high expectations. Under the category of setting high expectations Florida stopped “social promotion,” the widespread practice of moving of students from grade to grade despite failing classes, unless they demonstrate grade-level reading proficiency. Dramatic progress ensued, particularly among Hispanic students.²¹

Previous criminality prevents one of every 10 young adults from being able to join the Armed Forces—meaning that 3.4 million people who would otherwise make the cut are unable to join.

Criminal History

Another hindrance to young adults’ ability to join the military is criminal history. Though each branch’s criminal-background requirements vary slightly, the Armed Forces jointly adhere to a common standard of moral behavior as a means of evaluating a recruit’s ability to succeed in military service. Across the Services, emphasis is placed on conviction of a crime, not so much on the punishment given. Criminal history is relevant because it shows recruiters the kind of behavior and activities that recruits have exhibited in the past—which, while not predictive, certainly hint at the potential for similar behavior in the future. Depending on the seriousness of the

infraction, the Services determine whether a potential recruit with a criminal record poses too great a liability. Across the branches it is widely emphasized that people do not have an absolute right to serve in the United States military.²² Rather, military service is a privilege, and thus necessitates a certain level of societal regard and good behavior.

According to the 2009 Mission: Readiness report, criminality prevents one of every 10 young adults from being able to join the armed forces.²³ That means that 3.4 million people who would otherwise make the cut are unable to join. For many, these patterns of crime that disqualify them from the military begin early in their youth. The U.S. Department of Justice reports that in 2015, nearly 1 million juveniles were arrested,²⁴ and the National Institute of Justice claims that according to The Pittsburgh Youth Study, “52 to 57 percent of juvenile delinquents continue to offend up to age 25.”²⁵ Disqualifying crimes are various and include felonies or serious misdemeanors. Additionally, the military has low tolerance for recruits demonstrating consistent use of illegal or recreational drugs or contributing to their distribution. In 2016, a third of Americans ages 18 to 25 had used marijuana within the past year, and over 50 percent within their lifetime.²⁶ The opioid epidemic—widely reported by the media, and declared by both President Trump and members of both political parties in the U.S. Congress in mid-October 2017 to be a public health emergency—predominantly occurs among that same age group.²⁷ Though drug misuse is a topic all its own, it is important to note that high numbers of young Americans on drugs will logically result in fewer men and women capable of serving in the military. Other situations that disqualify recruits from service are sexual

21. Israel Ortega, “Florida’s Success Story,” Heritage Foundation *Commentary*, January 24, 2009, <http://www.heritage.org/education/commentary/floridas-success-story>.

22. Rod Powers, “Army Criminal History Waivers,” *The Balance*, September 8, 2016, <https://www.thebalance.com/army-criminal-history-waivers-3344759> (accessed January 4, 2018).

23. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

24. U.S. Department of Justice, “Statistical Briefing Book,” March 27, 2017, <https://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/crime/qa05101.asp> (accessed January 4, 2018).

25. “From Juvenile Delinquency to Young Adult Offending,” National Institute of Justice, March 11, 2014, <https://www.nij.gov/topics/crime/Pages/delinquency-to-adult-offending.aspx> (accessed January 4, 2018).

26. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, “Table 1.7B—Types of Illicit Drug Use in Lifetime, Past Year, and Past Month among Persons Aged 18 to 25: Percentages, 2015 and 2016,” <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/NSDUH-DetTabs-2016/NSDUH-DetTabs-2016.htm#tab1-7B> (accessed October 31, 2017).

27. National Institute on Drug Abuse, “Misuse of Prescription Drugs,” last updated January 2018, <https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/research-reports/prescription-drugs/trends-in-prescription-drug-abuse/adolescents-young-adults> (accessed January 29, 2018).

offenses, repeated convictions of drunk driving and similar infractions, and being on probation.²⁸ Trends in criminal activity among youth can be affected by education programs, with good programs leading to a decrease in criminal behavior and poor programs worsening the problem.

Kids engaged in well-managed academic and extracurricular activities are less likely to commit crimes than their counterparts. Nationwide organizations like the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, which provide after-school community-center activities for children of all ages, report successes on multiple fronts. According to its National Youth Outcome Report, “regularly attending Club members ages 12 to 17 outperform their peers nationally on school grades” and “31% of Club girls ages 12 to 15 are physically active every day, compared with 23% of girls in the same age range nationally.”²⁹ Similarly, while they lack corresponding data proving their effectiveness, it stands to reason that national civic programs like Junior ROTC, Civil Aviation Patrol, and the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts can play an important role in this area based on their work with children and adolescents to promote civic virtues, citizenship, and help them steer clear of crime.

Other successful programs target crime-ridden areas and provide outreach to affected children and teens. At the local level, Seattle Seahawks coach Pete Carroll founded A Better Seattle, which “funds and supports the deployment of Seattle’s Alive & Free professional trained street outreach workers who serve youth impacted by gangs, violence and the juvenile justice system.”³⁰ Many schools now offer the “keepin’ it REAL” program—it replaced

the Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) program, which did not prove effective. Keepin’ it REAL focuses on teaching decision-making skills that can be broadly applied to situations and behaviors other than drug use, such as teen pregnancy and aggressive behavior, and has demonstrated success.³¹

Health Issues

According to the former commander of the U.S. Army Recruiting Command, Major General Allen Batschelet, the biggest culprit keeping young adults from qualifying to serve in the United States military however is health concerns, mostly obesity.³² In 2015, he stated: “The obesity issue is the most troubling because the trend is going in the wrong direction.... By 2020 it could be as high as 50%, which means only 2 in 10 would qualify to join the Army.”³³ The Air Force’s Recruiting commander, Major General Garrett Harencak, adds: “We have a problem with obesity in kids.”³⁴ The Mission: Readiness report previously cited reports that “27% of young Americans are too overweight for military service,” and of the total number of those who attempt to join the Armed Forces, approximately 15,000 are rejected every year because they are overweight.³⁵ These statistics are likely to climb. Based on data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, one in three adults is obese, as are one in six children and adolescents between ages two and 19.³⁶ Trends show growing numbers in the coming years. The Trust for America’s Health reports that in 2006, Mississippi was the only U.S. state with an adult obesity rate above 30 percent. Today, 30 states can claim that dubious honor.³⁷

28. U.S. Army, “Disqualifiers,” <http://army.com/info/usa/disqualifiers> (accessed October 31, 2017).

29. Boys & Girls Clubs of America, “Making a Difference,” <https://www.bgca.org/about-us/club-impact> (accessed November 17, 2017).

30. A Better Seattle, “Building a Safer, Stronger, Thriving Seattle,” <http://abetterseattle.com/> (accessed November 17, 2017).

31. Amy Nordrum, “The New D.A.R.E. Program—This One Works,” *Scientific American*, September 10, 2014, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-new-d-a-r-e-program-this-one-works/> (accessed January 3, 2018).

32. Blake Stilwell, “Here’s Why Most Americans Can’t Join the Military,” *Business Insider*, September 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/heres-why-most-americans-cant-join-the-military-2015-9> (accessed January 4, 2018).

33. *Ibid.*

34. American Legion, “A Passion for Recruiting,” December 2016, <https://www.legion180.org/single-post/2016/12/28/A-Passion-For-Recruiting> (accessed January 4, 2018).

35. Mission: Readiness, “Ready, Willing, and Unable to Serve,” p. 4.

36. National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, “Overweight & Obesity Statistics,” <https://www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/health-statistics/overweight-obesity> (accessed October 31, 2017).

37. Laura M. Segal, Jack Rayburn, and Stacy E. Beck, “The State of Obesity: 2017,” Trust for America’s Health, August 2017, <http://healthyamericans.org/assets/files/TFAH-2017-ObesityReport-FINAL.pdf> (accessed January 4, 2018).

Another 32 percent of the young adult population cannot join the military for health concerns other than obesity. These issues include asthma, hearing and eyesight problems, and mental illness.³⁸ Combined with weight issues, the number of 17-to-24-year-olds who cannot join the military for health reasons *exceeds half that age group*. In numbers, that means more than 17 million young adults are disqualified from military service due to health issues. Not only do these statistics highlight a health crisis among America's youth and adult populations alike, they point to an underlying national defense crisis that will ensue if the military cannot arm enough physically and emotionally fit individuals.

Nearly one-third of young Americans are too overweight for military service.

The percentage of young Americans who meet the national guidelines of 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity per day continues to drop. In 2008, the percentage of those between ages six and 11 who met this standard was 42 percent—it was 8 percent for those between 12 and 15, and 7.6 percent for those between 16 and 19.³⁹

At a very basic level, the remedy for fighting the obesity epidemic begins with a greater emphasis on healthy living for all Americans. This is a conversation that should take place at every level of society, from families in their kitchens to school boards, town hall meetings, House and Senate floors, and the Oval Office.

In 1956, responding to alarming reports about the state of fitness among American youth, President Dwight Eisenhower established the President's Council on Youth Fitness with cabinet status to create public awareness. Over the years, Presidents have appointed leading fitness figures, such

as Arnold Schwarzenegger (1990–1992) and Florence Griffith Joyner (1993–1998) to lead or serve on the council. Schools and physical education teachers used to routinely administer the Presidential Physical Fitness Award program to grade and recognize physical fitness in school-age children.

The Presidential Physical Fitness Award in its prior form was phased out at the end of the 2012–2013 school year. According to the Council on Youth Fitness, the test was phased out because it “*continued to place emphasis on performance fitness and catered to more athletic students who thrived on competition.*” (Emphasis added.) Growing up, many Americans can probably remember being recognized for physical fitness with the Presidential Physical Fitness Award, which was accompanied by a patch and certificate. Now such public recognition is actively discouraged; the council's guide suggesting that “posting fitness results can create a situation that fosters negative attitudes toward physical activity,” and that “recognizing and posting students' fitness scores for fitness [sic] can create a feeling of frustration among students who struggle with their personal fitness levels.”⁴⁰ But sometimes a feeling of frustration can be motivation to improve.

First Lady Michelle Obama initiated the “Let's Move” campaign to solve the problem of childhood obesity and improve children's health. The program was terminated when President Barack Obama left office.⁴¹ President Trump has yet to appoint new leaders for the council.⁴² Although data do not exist that prove the council or the Let's Move campaign resulted in measurable benefits, it seems plausible that they were helpful.

Today, who are the role models for American youth to emulate in the area of physical fitness? None come to mind. National figures and celebrities, athletes and actors, should all be using their prominence and popularity to raise awareness of the importance of good health and fitness. Children and adults alike need to

38. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

39. Daniel B. Bornstein et al., “Which US States Pose the Greatest Threats to Military Readiness and Public Health?” *Journal of Public Health Management and Practice*, January 9, 2018, http://journals.lww.com/jphmp/Abstract/publishahead/Which_US_States_Pose_the_Greatest_Threats_to.99523.aspx (accessed January 12, 2018).

40. Presidential Youth Fitness Program, “Presidential Youth Fitness Program Physical Educator Resource Guide,” <https://pyfp.org/doc/teacher-guide.pdf>, (accessed January 12, 2018).

41. Let's Move, <https://letsmove.obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/> (accessed December 8, 2017).

42. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, “President's Council on Fitness, Sports & Nutrition,” <https://www.hhs.gov/fitness/about-pcfsn/our-history/index.html> (accessed December 8, 2017).

understand and integrate quality nutrition, frequent exercise, less time on the couch, and more time outdoors in order to improve their quality of life and health. Not only will this help fight the obesity trend, it may also increase the number of eligible military recruits. Healthy habits instilled in young people early on are more likely to stick with them later in life.

In another report by Mission: Readiness titled “Too Fat to Fight,” suggestions for fighting the obesity crisis also point to improved school programs at the state and local level. The report describes programs that support “reducing the high-calorie, low-nutrition foods available at schools, increasing access to healthier school meals, and helping schools take advantage of ‘teachable moments’ to encourage children and their parents to adopt healthier eating habits that can last a lifetime.”⁴³ Congress responded in 2010 by passing the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, which set policy for a number of school meal programs. The act allowed the U.S. Department of Agriculture to make concrete reforms to meal programs by imposing certain nutrition standards.⁴⁴

Today’s military recruiting leaders echo these calls for schools to institute concrete changes that promote healthy habits. Major General Snow says, “It really starts with something as simple as what our kids are fed in schools. Changing meals is one of the ways to address that. I think a second aspect to that is really working with those who work with the education department to emphasize the importance of not doing away with physical education programs in elementary school and high school, because that’s important.”⁴⁵ This is all possible and encouraged at the local level, starting with the family, school boards, and state and local councils.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggest similar initiatives in schools, such as nutrition standards, physical education classes, and accessible water sources.⁴⁶ Some schools have paved the way with health programs for students that other schools can emulate. America SCORES, for example, is a nonprofit after-school program that in its first 16 years expanded to 14 cities nationwide. The initiative encourages students to “play soccer three days a week and perform community service or creative writing the remaining two days” of the week with trained instructors to lead them.⁴⁷ Like SCORES, towns such as Revere, Massachusetts, have found a way to jumpstart successful initiatives within their communities. Revere on the Move (ROTM) “focuses on policy, systems and environmental changes” that include “an adopt-a-park program, a district-wide walk to school initiative, a farmers market, school/community gardens and two urban trails.”⁴⁸ Finally, the U.S. Soccer Foundation’s Soccer for Success program targets underserved and at-risk youngsters in over 30 cities and currently serves a population of over 40,000 kids. It is very successful: 90 percent of Soccer for Success participants categorized as overweight or obese improved or maintained their body-mass-index during the program.⁴⁹ Successes such as these should encourage other schools and communities to follow suit.

The Military

In addition to these changes that will help increase the number of healthy, educated, and eligible recruits, the military itself should take action to raise awareness and preparedness among young people.

43. Mission: Readiness, “Too Fat to Fight,” 2010, p. 7, http://cdn.missionreadiness.org/MR_Too_Fat_to_Fight-1.pdf (accessed January 29, 2018).

44. U.S. Department of Agriculture, “Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act,” <https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/healthy-hunger-free-kids-act> (accessed January 3, 2018).

45. Emily Balli, “General: Army Struggles to Meet Goal of 80,000 Recruits,” *Tennessean*, December 1, 2016, <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/nation-now/2016/12/01/general-army-struggles-meet-goal-80000-recruits/94757310/> (accessed January 4, 2018).

46. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Community Efforts,” March 14, 2017, <https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/strategies/community.html> (accessed January 4, 2018).

47. Kristine A. Madsen et al., “After-School Program to Reduce Obesity in Minority Children: A Pilot Study,” *Journal of Child Health Care*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (October 15, 2009), http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1367493509344823?url_ver=Z39.88-2003&rfr_id=ori:rid:crossref.org&rfr_dat=cr_pub%3dpubmed (accessed January 29, 2018).

48. National League of Cities, “18 Top Achieving Cities, Towns, and Counties Receive Special Recognition for LMCTC Efforts,” November 15, 2013, <http://www.healthychommunitieshealthyfuture.org/18-top-achieving-cities-towns-and-counties-receive-special-recognition-for-lmctc-efforts/> (accessed January 4, 2018).

49. U.S. Soccer Foundation, “Impact,” <https://ussoccerfoundation.org/impact/>, (accessed January 25, 2018).

Most of the Services already have informal programs that help interested volunteers to qualify for service. Programs include pre-enlistment physical fitness programs to help prospective servicemembers lose weight and gain fitness. Most of these programs are informal and operated on the margins of official recruiting programs, often by recruiters after normal duty hours.⁵⁰ While commendable, the Defense Department should formalize these programs and acknowledge their need by providing additional resourcing and personnel.

Schools often resist collaboration with the military. By law, schools that receive assistance under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 are required to give military recruiters the same access to students that they provide to other prospective employers or colleges. They are also required to provide basic information on students when requested.⁵¹ But recruiters often face a hostile reception when they visit U.S. high school and college campuses. In some cases, American educators are openly opposed to military recruiter presence in the school. Some educators claim that students need to be “protected” from recruiters, arguing that recruiters should be limited to just one area in a school, the number of visits should be limited, and that “districts should require recruiters to fully disclose the health risks of military service.”⁵² (Recruiters for other professions, such as firefighters or police, are not required to routinely discuss the health risks of their professions.) Such “protections” actively jeopardize the success of the U.S. military.

With the support of additional enabling legislation from Congress, the military could play a more active role in helping parents and educators prepare young Americans for potential military service. The military should deliberately equip these representatives with the necessary materials and training to allow them to speak persuasively on the importance of completing high school, staying clear of crime, and maintaining physical fitness. Recruiters, who

are often potential role models, can host functions at the school level and discuss what keeps 71 percent of young people out of the Service, as well as activities that promote youth preparedness and point to its benefits. They can even help lead physical fitness activities in certain circumstances.

Recommendations

The executive branch should:

- **Initiate an integrated and comprehensive public awareness and advocacy program** to promote awareness of the problem of the inability of young Americans to qualify for basic military service. The executive branch should actively seek appropriate role models to help promote this campaign; and
- **Promptly appoint leading influential role models to serve as chairmen and members of the President’s Council on Fitness, Sports & Nutrition**, and direct them to develop a plan with specific outcomes to reverse the downhill fitness trend.

Congress (as it pertains to military-connected children) and the states (universally) should:

- **Establish commonsense school choice options** that enable parents to place their children in schools of their choice.

Congress, states, and local government should:

- **Support programs, such as Junior ROTC (managed by the Department of Defense), Scouting, Big Brother–Big Sister, and youth sports**, in order to provide healthy options and choices for children across the country. In particular areas with high percentages of teen and young adult crime, low high school graduation rates, and high obesity should be targeted; and

50. Adam Linehan, “The Recruiters: Searching for the Next Generation of Warfighters in a Divided America,” *Task & Purpose*, November 28, 2017, <http://taskandpurpose.com/east-orange-army-recruitment-divided-america/> (accessed January 4, 2018).

51. U.S. Department of Education, “Policy Guidance—Access to High School Students and Information on Students by Military Recruiters,” October 2002, <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/hottopics/ht-10-09-02a.html> (accessed January 12, 2018).

52. Seth Kershner and Scott Harding, “Do Military Recruiters Belong in Schools?” *Education Week*, October 27, 2015, <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2015/10/28/do-military-recruiters-belong-in-schools.html>, (accessed January 12, 2018).

- **Pass additional enabling legislation to promote and encourage the presence of military personnel and events in K–12 schools** to raise awareness and increase exposure among students.

Conclusion

Major General Snow says: “I don’t think it’s a challenge that we can’t overcome.”⁵³ The reforms presented here lay the foundation for a movement that will require persistent engagement at a state and federal level of government and among the greater population. In order to increase the amount of young adults eligible to serve in the Armed Forces, quality education is paramount. Empowering parents to access learning options that work for their children early on increases graduation rates, decreases crime, and encourages healthy lifestyles, and should be a priori-

ty for lawmakers, educators, parents, and all citizens. All these effects will increase the number of young American adults who can join the Armed Forces—an absolute necessity in preparing the next generation of America’s defenders. For the United States and all Americans, the threat of an ever-dwindling military is nothing less than existential.

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53. Major General Jeffrey Snow, “A Looming National Security Crisis: Young Americans Unable to Join the Military,” panel discussion co-hosted by The Heritage Foundation and Mission: Readiness, October 12, 2017, video, <http://www.heritage.org/defense/event/looming-national-security-crisis-young-americans-unable-join-the-military>.