



Military Preparedness

Background

The ability of our military forces to fight and sustain the demands of assigned missions has defined military preparedness for generations of American soldiers.

Although preparedness is often framed in terms of budgets and resource distribution, the good health and human performance of armed forces personnel remains central to the defense of the United States and its allies.

Strong soldiers come from healthy populations. President Dwight D. Eisenhower recognized this in 1956 when he created the cabinet-level President's Council on Youth Fitness following a conference held at the U.S. Naval Academy. This agency continues today as the President's Council on Sports, Fitness, and Nutrition and is charged with the formulation of a national strategy to encourage regular physical activity (including sports) and promote good nutrition for Americans.

The charge of this council is now more important than ever because military preparedness has been compromised by nationwide declines in physical fitness. Data from a 2020 study now show that 77% of American youth (16 to 24 years of age) aren't qualified for military service without waivers. As explained by Stephanie Miller, deputy assistant secretary of defense, "Almost 44% of such youth are ineligible for service for multiple reasons, the most prevalent being overweight." Data from the prior 2017 study suggested that 71% were not qualified for service, which means that the problem has gotten worse in recent years.

Indeed, obesity rates are rising disproportionately among American youth. Current data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) show that obesity prevalence among young people (2-19 years) from 2017 to 2020 was nearly 20% – continuing a rise beginning in 2005-6.

Data from the CDC also show that just two in five young American adults are "eligible and active" for military service – eligible by body mass index and adequately physically active to withstand the rigors of basic training. Quoted in a joint publication from CDC and the Council for a Strong America, Lieutenant General (ret.) Mark Hertling observed: "The military has experienced increasing difficulty in recruiting soldiers as a result of physical inactivity, obesity, and malnutrition among our nation's youth. Not addressing these issues now will impact our future national security."

It is worth noting that obesity affects subpopulations of American youth disproportionately. With respect to race, the CDC has noted that the prevalence of obesity among black (25%) and Hispanic (26%) youth is higher than among white (17%) and Asian (9%) youth. This is relevant because the Pew Research Center has shown that the proportion of racial and ethnic minorities in the military (43% in 2017) has grown steadily in recent decades. Hispanic Americans, in particular, are the fastest growing minority population in the military.

Exercise scientists from *The Citadel* note that U.S. geography also predicts threats to military preparedness. In a 2019 study using "home of record" data from the Army, young recruits who entered basic training from 2010 to 2013 were evaluated for cardiorespiratory fitness, body mass index and injury rates. What these researchers found was that 10 states from the South (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee and Texas) supplied female or male recruits who were markedly less physically fit and/or more likely to become injured than recruits from other states. In fact, when compared to the most fit states, the incidence of injuries from these Southern recruits is 22% higher. Using 2018 data from the Department of Defense, we see that six of these states send a higher relative share of recruits to the military.

ACSM Position

It is the position of the American College of Sports Medicine® (ACSM) that policymakers should support the President's Council on Sports, Fitness, and Nutrition and its mission to encourage physical fitness among America's youth. Moreover, ACSM believes that reductions in physical activity and decreased offerings of physical education in school systems weaken that mission and constitute a national security concern. Efforts to reverse the obesity crisis should back local and national physical activity programs and restore physical education in schools. When ample physical activity leads to improved physical fitness, we're ensured a safer and healthy future for our country and our allies around the world.