

77 Percent of American Youth Can't Qualify for Military Service

Better nutrition and physical activity can yield healthier outcomes for youth and bolster national security

77 percent of young adults cannot join the military

Malnutrition, especially malnutrition manifesting as obesity, poses a threat not only to our nation's health, but to our national security. Nationwide, 77 percent of youth between the ages of 17 and 24 cannot qualify for military service, an increase from 2017's ineligibility rate of 71 percent. Overweight disqualifies 11 percent of youth from serving if they so choose, and contributes to the 44 percent of youth who are disqualified for multiple reasons.¹

Obesity rates for 2- to 19-year-olds increased from 17 percent in 2009–10, to 19 percent in 2017–18.² During the pandemic, rates of obesity among children in this age group increased even further, from 19 percent in August 2019 to 22 percent in August 2020.³ While such increases are alarming, there are solutions.

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) provides access to healthy foods and nutrition education for women, infants, and children under 5 years old. Participation has been linked to improved dietary quality, and increased fruit and vegetable consumption.⁴ Older children consume up to half of their daily calories at school, making the National



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School Lunch Program (NSLP) an important component of good nutrition. The Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 led to updated nutrition standards for the NSLP and improved guidelines for food and drinks available in schools.⁵ Since these standards were implemented, fruit and vegetable consumption by participating children increased by 16 and 23 percent, respectively.⁶ Providing opportunities for children to reach the recommended 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity at school can also help kids maintain a healthy weight.⁷

Policymakers should support nutrition and physical activity programs

The retired admirals and generals of Mission: Readiness recognize that the underlying causes of obesity cannot be solved by the efforts of the military alone. With an increase in youth being ineligible for military service, it is more important than ever for policymakers, including state and local school boards, to promote healthy eating, increased access to fresh and nutritious foods, and physical activity for children from an early age.

¹ U.S. Department of Defense, Office of People Analytics (2022). 2020 Qualified Military Available (QMA) study.

² Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (n.d.). State of childhood obesity. National obesity monitor. <https://stateofchildhoodobesity.org/monitor/>

³ Lange, S. J., Kompaniyets, L., Freedman, D.S., et al. Longitudinal trends in Body Mass Index before and during the COVID-19 pandemic among persons aged 2–19 Years — United States, 2018–2020. https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7037a3.htm?s_cid=mm7037a3_w

⁴ Food Research and Action Center. (2017). The role of the federal child nutrition programs in improving health and well-being. <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/hunger-health-role-federal-child-nutrition-programs-improving-health-well-being.pdf>

⁵ U. S. Department of Agriculture. (2017). Healthy Hunger Free Kids Act. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/healthy-hunger-free-kids-act>

⁶ U. S. Department of Agriculture. Fact sheet: Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act school meals implementation. <https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2014/05/20/fact-sheet-healthy-hunger-free-kids-act-school-meals-implementation>

⁷ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2022). How much physical activity do children need? [https://www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/basics/children/index.htm#:~:text=Children%20and%20adolescents%20ages%206,doing%20push%2Dups\)%20%E2%80%93%203](https://www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/basics/children/index.htm#:~:text=Children%20and%20adolescents%20ages%206,doing%20push%2Dups)%20%E2%80%93%203)

Mission: Readiness

Retired admirals and generals strengthening national security by ensuring kids stay in school, stay fit, and stay out of trouble.

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1025 Connecticut Avenue NW / Suite 1100 / Washington, DC 20036 / 202.464.7005

