MISSION: READINESS
COUNCIL FOR A STRONG AMERICA
TEXAS

REPORT

Texas Needs...All That They Can Be

Military recruiting and civilian workforce shortage demand further investments in Texas' young children



Acknowledgements

Council for a Strong America is a national, bipartisan nonprofit that unites membership organizations, including law enforcement leaders, retired admirals and generals, and business executives, that promote solutions ensuring that our next generation of Americans will be successful, productive members of society.

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

Supported by tax-deductible contributions from foundations, individuals, and corporations.

Major funder: Conrad N. Hilton Foundation

Authors:
Tawana Bandy-Fattah, Research Director
Trinady Maddock, Former Associate

Contributors:
Kolby Monnig, Texas State Director
Jaime Olson, Feeding Texas Director of Policy and Advocacy
Clayton Stewart, Texas Pediatric Society, Director of Advocacy and Health Policy

May 2024

©2024 Council for a Strong America. All Rights Reserved.



Summary

A shrinking workforce paired with ongoing issues related to gaps in skills and employment disqualifications is causing labor shortages and fierce competition for qualified individuals in most employment sectors, including our service branches.

On the military side, 77 percent of youth between the ages of 17 and 24 nationwide cannot meet the military's eligibility requirements due to inadequate education, obesity or other disqualifying health conditions, or having a record of crime or substance use. Meanwhile, on the civilian side, there are only 80 available workers for every 100 open jobs in Texas. These dual challenges pose a threat to both the Texas economy and national security.

Texas must invest more in early education, to set young children on the path to success and improve readiness for the workforce, including military service if youth so choose. Similarly, by supporting programs that improve child health, including effective nutrition programs, policymakers can bolster the future workforce, both civilian and military. Continued investments in the education and health of young Texans are needed to ensure that our children—and consequently our state and our nation—are all that they can be.

Worst Military Recruiting Environment in 50 Years

The U.S. Army, Navy, and Air Force all missed their active-duty recruiting goals in FY 2023, with the three branches reporting a combined shortfall of more than 20,000 enlistees.[1] The U.S. Coast Guard will fill only 75 percent of the number of needed recruits in 2023.[2] Texas, along with 48 other states, failed to meet its recruitment goal for the Army National Guard in 2022.[3]

Part of this problem is the fact that 77 percent of youth between the ages of 17 and 24 nationwide cannot meet the military's eligibility requirements due to inadequate education, obesity or other disqualifying health conditions, or having a record of crime or substance use.[4] This sobering statistic is from before the pandemic; the situation is likely to be worse now, as rates of obesity have increased.[5] The problem is further compounded by the low percentage of young people (nine percent) who are interested in military service in the first place.[6] Some have described the current situation as the "worst recruiting environment in the 50-year history of the all-volunteer military."[7]

Readiness concerns are echoed by the private sector. According to September 2023 U.S. Chamber of Commerce data, there were 774,000 job openings in Texas, with only 80 available workers for every 100 open jobs, and a labor participation rate of 64.2.[8] Research has estimated that educational and skill shortages could cost Texas' economy more than $25 billion in lost economic output by 2029. In particular, Texas has a shortage of workers with a bachelor's degree or higher and a surplus of workers with an associate degree or some college.[9]

These numbers make it clear that we have more work to do to ensure that ALL young Texans are ready for college or careers, including military service, if they so choose. Nothing less than our economy and future national security depend on it.

Investments in Early Education to Improve Readiness

A successful workforce depends on young people of all backgrounds having the hard (academic) and soft (social) skills that are vital for success. Ensuring that all Texas children have the opportunity for a quality education, regardless of zip code, and beginning in the earliest years of their lives, can help ensure more of the state's children are developing these skills.

Early Care and Education:
The birth-to-age-3 time frame is a vital period of rapid brain development.[10] During these years, more than one million new neural connections form every second. This early foundation informs children's cognition, health, and behavior throughout life.

Academic Benefits:
Studies have found that early education has the potential to positively change life path trajectories for children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds who face compounding barriers to success.[11] Early exposure to stimulating environments led by responsive and caring adults is an important predictor of later life outcomes in adulthood.[12] Children who do not receive the support they need early in life are more susceptible to poor outcomes, including developmental delays, academic failure, high school dropout, and involvement with crime.[13]

Providing children with high-quality child care in infancy and early childhood can buffer against risk factors and disadvantages, and facilitate the development of skills and accessibility to resources needed to have successful life outcomes.[14] For example, a longitudinal study of more than 1,300 children found that children in higher-quality child care were better prepared for school at age 4 compared to children in lower-quality child care. At age 15, they had significantly lower levels of behavior problems.[15] By age 26, participants from families with low incomes who spent two or more years in high-quality child care were more likely to graduate from college and had higher salaries.[16]

Another study found that children who were randomly selected to attend a high-quality child care and early education program from ages 2 to 3 had fewer behavior problems (as rated by parents) than children who were not selected.[17]

Health Benefits:
Children who are overweight or obese in early childhood (which is the case for 13 percent of 2- to 5-year-old U.S. children) are four times as likely to become overweight or obese adults.[18] By 2040, it is estimated that the number of overweight Texas adults will increase by 94 percent and the number of obese adults will increase by 174 percent–potentially costing Texans $26 billion.[19] Child care settings can be at the forefront of obesity prevention because many children are in these settings for substantial periods of time. Medical professionals, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, have developed recommendations around nutrition and physical activity in child care.[20]

Research shows that early care and education that emphasizes healthy eating and physical activity can help reduce children's risk of obesity. For example, a study of North Carolina's Abecedarian program found that girls who participated were less likely to become obese as adults, and boys had fewer risk factors for heart disease, stroke and diabetes.[21]

The Department of Defense's child care overhaul effort prioritized quality and affordability

Quality: The military requires its providers to attain state health and safety licensure as well as national accreditation. Nearly all (97 percent) of military child development centers are accredited, compared to about nine percent of civilian centers.[22] If a provider is deficient in meeting these standards, the military works with them to ensure adequate compliance. Providers are subject to four unannounced inspections per year, and ongoing noncompliance can result in closure and dismissal of staff.[23]

The education and training of child care instructors is another key indicator of quality. The military child care system mandates a training program (including on-the-job training) and credentials as a condition for employment. This training is provided at no cost to the employee and it is linked to a career ladder that leads to increased compensation for each step. Additionally, the military system offers higher wages than civilian counterparts and benefits, which has dramatically reduced staff turnover.[24]

Affordability: High-quality child care is expensive, and most military families are unable to afford these costs in full. Fees for on-base programs are on a sliding scale, determined by family income. On average, these subsidies cover 50 percent of the cost. Families using programs in civilian communities, when on-base care is not available, receive a stipend to cover a portion of their costs as well.[25]



Better Nutrition to Combat Obesity

Overweight /obesity is a leading disqualifier for military service.[26] While addressing the nation's childhood obesity crisis requires a multifaceted approach, ensuring all children have consistent access to fresh and nutritious food at every stage of development— starting prenatally to age 3—is critical to assuring our young adults are healthy, prepared, and equipped to succeed in whatever life path they choose.

While counterintuitive, one factor associated with obesity is food insecurity—lacking access to sufficient, healthy food.[27] The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children program (WIC) helps reduce the risk of obesity in families with low incomes, by promoting healthy eating and providing nutrition education for pregnant women, and children younger than 5. WIC's focus is improving access to fresh and nutritious foods in the communities where participants live.[28] Participation in WIC is linked to better overall dietary quality, increased consumption of fruit and vegetables, and reduced intake of added sugars.[29] Between 2010 and 2020, 36 states, including Texas, reported decreases in obesity among children ages 2 to 4 years old participating in WIC. Similar results were found for high weight-for-length among infants aged 3 to 23 months from families enrolled in WIC.[30]

Additionally, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) aids individuals with low incomes, including nearly 1 in 4 children.[31] Research finds SNAP participation is associated with improved long-term health outcomes in adults, including lower risk of heart disease and obesity.[32] Infants and children who are SNAP recipients are more likely to have regular check-ups, and adult participants incur roughly $1,400 less in medical expenses than non-participants.[33]

Texas Needs Greater Investment in Young Children

High-Quality Child Care:
Despite the known benefits of high-quality early care and education, especially for at-risk children, many families have trouble finding and affording care. And, even when care is available, it is often low quality. There are four main child care problems in Texas and across the U.S.:

Access: In Texas, 48 percent of residents live in a child care desert, an area where there are more than three times as many children as licensed child care slots.[34] Typically, availability is especially limited for families who have infants and toddlers, work evening and night shifts, or live in rural areas.[35] Subsidized care is reaching only 25 percent of eligible families with children under the age of 5 and only 21 percent of eligible families with infants and toddlers.[36]

Affordability: Parents pay an average of $9,204 for center-based infant care in Texas, compared to $11,139 for public college tuition.[37] Further, this current average price does not represent the true cost of high-quality care. Child care, particularly for infants and toddlers, is unaffordable for many families, especially those with low incomes.

Quality: Only about half of children served by an early childhood education program in the Texas Statewide System are in a program that participates in the Texas Rising Star (TRS) quality rating and improvement system. Infants and toddlers are the least likely age to participate in a TRS-participating program.[38] Thus the quality of child care received by many very young Texans is unknown.

Compensation: Despite the high cost of care to families, child care educators are poorly compensated, with annual mean wages in Texas of $25,910, compared to $39,620 for preschool teachers, and $59,560 for kindergarten teachers.[39] Low wages contribute to teacher turnover and staffing shortages,[40] further reducing availability of care, creating instability for child care programs, parents, and children, and impacting the quality of care.

These problems are compounded by the fact that the child care sector is struggling to survive, with historic labor shortages due to low compensation and high inflation. The need to improve availability and affordability of high-quality child care, as well as advance initiatives that will stabilize programs and help recruit and retain qualified staff, is critical.

WIC:
With regard to WIC, federal policymakers must increase WIC funding to support additional enrollment in the program. Higher funding levels would support modernizing the program through expanding options, such as remote enrollment, benefit issuance, and facilitate online ordering.[41] Further, the monthly benefit for the purchase of fruits and vegetables should be increased.

Conclusion

Labor shortages and skills gaps in Texas are expected to persist through the end of the decade with a potential huge cost to the state economy, as well as to national security. Continued investments in the education and health of young Texans are needed to ensure that our children are all that they can be.

Endnotes

1 Roll Call (2023, October 18). Military obesity rates soar, compounding recruitment challenges. https://rollcall.com/2023/10/18/military-obesity-rates-soar-compounding-recruitment-challenges/

2 3News (2023, September 28). Coast Guard looks to younger generation for recruitment. https://www.kiiitv.com/article/news/local/coast-guard-looks-to-younger-generation-for-recruitment/503-56e47257-e01b-4627-84d6-5f0dbbe68a6d

3 Texas Standard (2022, December 2022). After a slow recruiting year, states are trying new ways to attract people to the National Guard. https://www.texasstandard.org/stories/after-a-slow-recruiting-year-states-are-trying-new-ways-to-attract-people-to-the-national-guard/

4 U.S. Department of Defense, Office of People Analytics (2022). 2020 Qualified Military Available (QMA) study. https://prod-media.asvabprogram.com/CEP_PDF_Contents/Qualified_Military_Available.pdf

5 Jha, S., & Mehendale, A. M. (2022). Increased incidence of obesity in children and adolescents post-COVID-19 pandemic: A review article. Cureus. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9582903/

6 U. S. Army (2022, October 10). Secretary of the Army Christine Wormuth's remarks to the 2022 AUSA opening ceremony (as prepared). https://www.army.mil/article/260969/secretary_of_the_army_christine_wormuths_remarks_to_the_2022_ausa_opening_ceremony_october_10_2022as_prepared

7 USA Today (2023, July 5). The Army is desperate for smart, fit soldiers. https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2023/07/05/army-recruiting-crisis-fit-camp-200-million-cost/70342289007/

8 U.S. Chamber of Commerce (2024, January). The worker shortage across America. Texas. https://www.uschamber.com/workforce/the-states-suffering-most-from-the-labor-shortage?state=tx

9 American Action Forum. (2019). Projecting future skill shortages through 2029. https://www.americanactionforum.org/research/projecting-future-skill-shortages-through-2029/

10 Harvard Center for the Developing Child (n.d.). InBrief: The science of early childhood development. https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/inbrief-science-of-ecd/

11 From neurons to neighborhoods. (2000). https://www.nap.edu/catalog/9824/from-neurons-to-neighborhoods-the-science-of-early-childhood-development

12 Walker, S.P., Chang, S.M., Vera-Hernandez, M., & Grantham-McGregor, S. (2011). Early childhood stimulation benefits adult competence and reduces violent behavior. Pediatrics, 127(5), 849-857. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/21518715/

13 Hertzman C, & Wiens M. (1995). Child development and long-term outcomes: A population health perspective and summary of successful interventions. Soc Sci Med (43), 1083–95. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/8890409/

14 Magnuson, K., Meyers, M., Ruhm, C., & Waldfogel, J. (2004). Inequality in preschool education and school readiness. American Educational Research Journal, 41(1), 115-157. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.3102/00028312041001115

15 Vandell, D. L., Belsky, J., Burchinal, M., et al. (2010). Do effects of early child care extend to age 15 years? Results from the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development. Child Development, 81, 737-756. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/20573102/

16 Bustamante, A. S., Dearing, E., Zachrisson, H. D., & Vandell, D. L. (2021, October 18). Adult outcomes of sustained high-quality early child care and education: Do they vary by family income? Child Development. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13696

17 Yazejian, N., Bryant, D. M., Horm, D., Hans, S., St. Clair, L., & Burchinal, M. (2017). Child and parenting outcomes after 1 year of Educare. Child Development. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12688

18 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021). Prevalence of childhood obesity in the United States. https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/childhood.html#:~:text=The%20prevalence%20of%20obesity%20was,to%2019%2Dyear%2Dolds.; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2016). Childhood obesity causes and consequences. https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/childhood/causes.html

19 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021). Prevalence of childhood obesity in the United States. https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/childhood.html#:~:text=The%20prevalence%20of%20obesity%20was,to%2019%2Dyear%2Dolds.; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2016). Childhood obesity causes and consequences. https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/childhood/causes.html

20 American Academy of Pediatrics (et al.) (2010). Preventing childhood obesity in early care and education programs. https://www.foodprogramwi.org/pdfs/preventing_obesity.pdf

21 Campbell, F., Conti, G., Heckman, J. J., Moon, S. H., Pinto, R., Pungello, E., et al. (2014). Early childhood investments substantially boost adult health. Science, 343(6178), 1478-1485. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/24675955/

22 U.S. Government Accountability Office (2023, February). Military child care. https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-23-105518.pdf

23 The Urban Institute. (2003). Improving child care quality: A comparison of civilian and military approaches. https://webarchive.urban.org/publications/310825.html

24 The Urban Institute. (2003). Improving child care quality: A comparison of civilian and military approaches. https://webarchive.urban.org/publications/310825.html

25 U.S. Government Accountability Office (2023, February). Military child care. https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-23-105518.pdf

26 American Security Project (2023, October). Combatting military obesity: Stigma's persistent impact on operational readiness. https://www.americansecurityproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Ref-0286-Combating-Military-Obesity.pdf

27 See, for example: Au, L.E., Zhu, S.M., Nhan, L.A., et al. (2019). Household food Insecurity is associated with higher adiposity among US schoolchildren ages 10-15 years: The Healthy Communities Study. The Journal of Nutrition, 642–1650. https://doi.org/10.1093/jn/nxz108

28 U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2024). Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children program (WIC). https://www.fns.usda.gov/wic

29 Food Research and Action Center. (2017). The role of the federal child nutrition programs in improving health and well-being. https://frac.org/research/resource-library/hunger-health-role-federal-child-nutrition-programs-improving-health-well

30 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2022). Obesity among young children enrolled in WIC. https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/obesity-among-WIC-enrolled-young-children.html

31 Center of Budget and Policy Priorities. (2023). SNAP is and remains our most effective tool to combat hunger. https://www.cbpp.org/blog/snap-is-and-remains-our-most-effective-tool-to-combat-hunger#:~:text=SNAP%20helps%20a%20broad%20range,States%20afford%20an%20adequate%20diet

32 Center of Budget and Policy Priorities. (2022). SNAP is linked with improved health outcomes and lower health care costs. https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/12-14-22fa.pdf

33 Center of Budget and Policy Priorities. (2022). SNAP is linked with improved health outcomes and lower health care costs. https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/12-14-22fa.pdf

34 Center for American Progress (2021). Early learning fact sheet 2021 Texas. https://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/12/Texas.pdf

35 Howe, S. & Oncken, L. (n.d.) The third pillar of care: Availability. New America. https://www.newamerica.org/in-depth/care-report/third-pillar-care-availability/

36 Start Strong PA. (2023). Child care works in Pennsylvania, 2023. https://papartnerships.maps.arcgis.com/apps/instant/portfolio/index.html?appid=9d38fca9e59e44ea8fab11caab2663ad

37 Child Care Aware (2023). Annual price of care 2022 child care affordability. https://info.childcareaware.org/hubfs/2022%20Price%20of%20Care%20State%20Fact%20Sheets/Texas%202022%20-Price%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf

38 Texas Statewide System monthly (2023). https://ccbn.twc.texas.gov/childcarenumbers/Texas_Statewide_System_monthly.html

39 Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022, May). Occupational employment and wage statistics Texas. https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_tx.htm

40 McLean, C., & Craven, M. (2021, June 6). Why did the child care teacher cross the road? To get to higher pay. The Hill. https://thehill.com/opinion/finance/557045-why-did-the-child-care-teacher-cross-the-road-to-get-to-higher-pay

41 Neuberger. Z. (2024). WIC's critical benefits only reach half of those eligible. https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/wics-critical-benefits-reach-only-half-of-those-eligible

Notes

Council for a Strong America is a national, bipartisan nonprofit that unites membership organizations, including law enforcement leaders, retired admirals and generals, and business executives, that promote solutions ensuring that our next generation of Americans will be successful, productive members of society.

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

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



COUNCIL FOR A
STRONG AMERICA

StrongNation.org