



# Child Care and National Security

How greater access to high-quality child care in Louisiana  
can help improve military readiness

## Acknowledgements

**Council for a Strong America** is a national, bipartisan nonprofit that unites five organizations comprised of law enforcement leaders, retired admirals and generals, business executives, pastors, and prominent coaches and athletes who promote solutions that ensure our next generation of Americans will be citizen-ready.

### **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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**Our national security depends on qualified young adults who are ready, willing, and able to serve in the U.S. military. However, educational deficits, health issues, and behavior problems currently prevent 75 percent of Louisiana youth from qualifying for service.<sup>1</sup>**

**There is scientific consensus that brain development from birth-to-age-5 sets the stage for children's future success. Two-thirds of children under the age of six in the United States, and 68 percent of children under the age of six in Louisiana,<sup>2</sup> have both parents or a single parent who works outside the home, and many of these children are not in high-quality child care. Without improvements to the child care system, our nation risks an even smaller recruiting pool in the future.**

### **Early brain development has lifelong impacts**

The birth-to-age-5 time frame is the most dramatic period of brain development.<sup>3</sup>

During these years, more than one million new neural connections form every second.<sup>4</sup> This early foundation informs children's cognition, health, and behavior throughout life.

Several factors can impair healthy brain development in early childhood. Without a stable environment and responsive caregivers, infants can experience toxic stress—a prolonged activation of the stress response system (known as “fight or flight”) that can lead to long-term deficits.<sup>5</sup> Visual, hearing, and sensory-motor problems can also impair brain development when left unaddressed.<sup>6</sup>

As a result of such negative experiences, differences in cognitive abilities emerge as early as nine months of age.<sup>7</sup> By age 3, children of different backgrounds have varying commands of language. A landmark study on this topic found that 3-year-old children with parents on welfare had

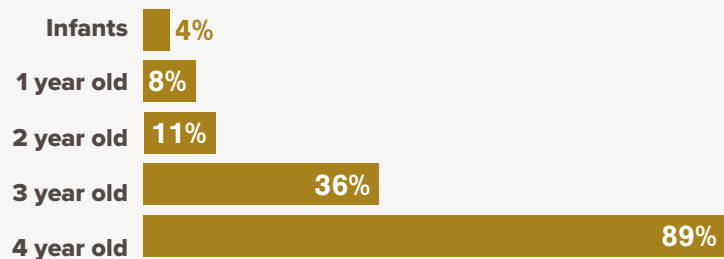
vocabularies that were half that of children with professional parents (525 vs. 1,116 words).<sup>8</sup>

## Too many young children are not in high-quality child care

Sixty-five percent of children under the age of 6 in the U.S.—nearly 15 million children—have parents or a single parent who works outside the home. In Louisiana, 283,000 children under the age of 6 (68 percent) have all available parents in the workforce.<sup>9</sup> Many of these children are in child care with non-relatives.<sup>10</sup>

## At-risk children with access to early care and education

Percent of at-risk children (185 percent of poverty) who can access any publicly-funded early care and education slot:



Source: Department of Education. Louisiana Believes. (2015, February). Early Childhood Care and Education Advisory Council.

However, many families have trouble finding child care, and even when care is available, it is often low-quality. There are three main problems with the U.S. child care system:

- **Cost:** The average annual cost of center-based child care for infants (\$5,754) is not much less than the average cost of in-state tuition for one year at a public university in Louisiana (\$8,130).<sup>14</sup> This high cost puts child care out of reach for many families, particularly low-income families.
  - **Quality:** Nineteen percent of American children in families receiving child care subsidies are not in licensed child care programs (a minimum bar for safety), and 89 percent of children are not in accredited child care programs (an indication of quality).<sup>15</sup> Out of the 1,517 center-based child care facilities in Louisiana, none have received national accreditation.<sup>16</sup>
- ### High-quality child care can help improve military readiness
- According to Department of Defense data, 71 percent of all young Americans between the ages of 17 and 24, and 75 percent of young Louisianians, do not qualify for military service.<sup>17</sup> Obesity is one of the leading reasons, barring nearly one-third of individuals from service. Educational shortcomings, including lack of a high school diploma or failure on the military's entrance exam, disqualify another third.<sup>18</sup> Finally, 10 percent of young adults have a criminal record and 30 percent have a drug abuse record that prevent them from qualifying.<sup>19</sup>
- ### Research shows that high-quality child care can support children's success, and military readiness, in three categories:
1. **Education:** 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 were still performing slightly above their peers.<sup>20</sup> Another recent study found that high-quality, full-day child care had a positive impact on children's language development at age 2.<sup>21</sup>

When combined with high-quality preschool, child care can have an even greater impact on academic achievement. For example, a study of North Carolina's Smart Start (child care) and More at Four (preschool) programs found that children in counties that spent more per child were two months ahead in reading and 1.5 months ahead in math by fifth grade when compared with children in counties that spent less.<sup>22</sup>

- 2. Obesity:** Obesity risk is shaped in the early years of life. Children who are overweight or obese in early childhood (which is the case for 20 percent of children in the U.S.)<sup>23</sup> are four times as likely to become overweight or obese adults.<sup>24</sup>

Child care that emphasizes healthy eating and physical activity can help reduce children's risk of obesity. For example, a study of the Abecedarian early care and education 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.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, two randomized studies of nutrition programs in Head Start centers found that participating children had a lower risk of obesity two years later.<sup>26</sup>

- 3. Behavior:** The aforementioned longitudinal study of more than 1,300 children found that children in higher-



## Learning from Military Child Care

The Department of Defense's child care system, the Military Child Development Program, has been cited by experts as a model for the nation.<sup>28</sup> **Across the country and around the world, 200,000 military children are growing and learning in high-quality early care and education programs, including over 200 children in Louisiana.**<sup>29</sup>

These programs are run by the different service branches under requirements set by the Department of Defense. Programs are comprehensive and high quality, focused on children's cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development. Nearly 95 percent of the military's child development centers are accredited.<sup>30</sup>

**The military offers diverse child care settings:**<sup>31</sup>

**44%**

Child development centers on military installations

**21%**

Centers and family child care homes in civilian settings

**21%**

Child care or preschool offered in K-12 schools

**14%**

Family child care homes in government housing



quality child care had significantly lower levels of behavior problems at age 15 compared to children in lower-quality child care.<sup>27</sup>

### **Policymakers should continue to promote access to high-quality child care**

The federal government supports child care affordability through direct funding, as well as through the tax code. The Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) provides funding to states to subsidize child care expenses for low-income families while parents work or pursue work, or are in school or training.

Through CCDBG, states receive formula-based grants to support both the supply and quality of child care. Federal law dictates that eligibility for CCDBG be limited to families with income at or below 85 percent of the state median income, but states have the discretion to lower the maximum threshold. For a family of three in Louisiana to qualify for child care assistance, their annual income must be \$31,872 or less.<sup>32</sup> Louisiana families face additional challenges



in obtaining child care because of funding cuts to the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP). Enrollment decreased from almost 40,000 children in 2007<sup>33</sup> to 17,000 in 2017,<sup>34</sup> and in July 2017, the CCAP was closed to new children. Since that time, the wait list has grown to almost 2,900 children.<sup>35</sup>

## **Conclusion**

**Given the long-term benefits of high-quality child care to children's cognitive, social, and emotional development, federal and state policymakers should continue to promote quality, access and affordability.**

More than two-thirds of children under the age of 6 in Louisiana have parents or a single parent who works outside the home, and many of these children are not in high-quality child care. Support for high-quality child care is an investment in our future national security.

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