

MISSION: READINESS

MILITARY LEADERS FOR KIDS

Walking, Biking... and National Security

America's military needs healthier recruits from Minnesota

WHO WE ARE

MISSION: READINESS is the national security organization of hundreds of retired generals, admirals and other senior military leaders who call for policies and investments that will help young Americans succeed in school and later in life, thus enabling more young adults to join the military if they choose to do so.



SUMMARY

As the retired admirals and generals of MISSION: READINESS, we are concerned that 75 percent of young Americans are unable to join the military.¹

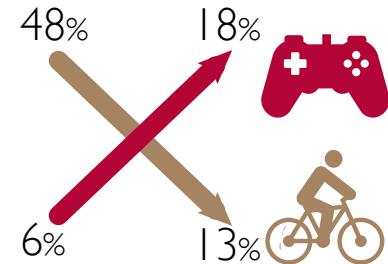
Being overweight or obese is the number one medical reason young adults cannot serve our country—more than one in five 17- to 24-year-olds are too overweight for military service.²

Obesity rates among children have more than tripled within three decades, threatening not only the overall health of America, but also the future strength of our military.³ Today, one in three adolescents ages 12 to 19 in the United States is overweight or obese.⁴ In Minnesota, more than one in four adolescents ages 10 to 17 are overweight or obese.⁵

Regular physical activity can reduce the risk for obesity and help people lead longer, healthier lives, yet too many young Americans are not active enough. Seven out of 10 kids nationwide are not getting the 60 minutes of daily physical activity recommended by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.⁶ Half of high school students in Minnesota are not even getting 30 minutes daily.⁷

Over the past generation, two trends have gone in unhealthy directions:

Childhood obesity rates have more than tripled while a third as many children are walking or biking to school.^{8,9}



Walking and bicycling for daily transportation are important sources of physical activity, but they have declined dramatically while childhood obesity has skyrocketed. To encourage healthy lifestyles that include adequate physical activity, policymakers can help by creating environments where the healthy choice is also the easy choice.

For decades, community planning has frequently overlooked the opportunity for physical activity through transportation. Our communities often lack safe walking and biking routes between schools, recreational facilities, neighborhoods, and shopping areas. Yet research links sidewalks and safe street crossings, bike paths, traffic-calming devices, and other infrastructure with more walking and biking and greater physical activity.¹⁰

Creating active transportation options impacts national security. When we make the healthy choice the easy choice and help youth in America become more physically active, we ensure that more people who want to join the military are fit enough to do so.

PROTECTING LIVES HERE AND OVERSEAS

One of the most highly regarded medical journals, *The Lancet*, recently reported that physical inactivity is the fourth leading cause of death worldwide—"on par with both smoking and obesity." The researchers found that inactivity accounts for approximately one out of every 10 deaths in



More soldiers were evacuated from Iraq and Afghanistan for serious sprains and fractures than combat injuries.

the United States due to increased risk from ailments such as heart disease, breast and colon cancer, and type 2 diabetes.¹¹

In less than two generations, the time spent on physical activity by adults in the U.S. has declined 32 percent and is on track to have dropped 46 percent by 2030.¹² Similarly, seven in 10 adolescents nationwide do not get the 60 minutes of daily physical activity recommended.¹³ Approximately half

of high school students in Minnesota are not physically active for at least 30 minutes five days a week.¹⁴



5 out of 10

high school students in Minnesota are not physically active at least 30 minutes five days a week.

This is an issue of critical concern to our military. In addition to shrinking the pool of potential recruits, a decline in physical fitness impacts those who enlist in the military. One study found that 14 percent of new male

Army recruits said they did not exercise or play any sports in a typical week prior to joining.¹⁵ The military can work wonders in boot camp to help most recruits increase their physical fitness, but research shows that of recruits who could not do 11 pushups upon entry, close to half could not complete boot camp.¹⁶

We also know from military research that less fit recruits are more prone to musculoskeletal injuries such as leg and

ankle injuries.¹⁷ In fact, more soldiers were evacuated from Iraq and Afghanistan for serious sprains and fractures than for combat injuries.¹⁸ When a soldier goes down in the field of combat, no one blows a whistle to stop the action: others have to risk their lives to remove him or her from harm's way.

Right now more than one in five young adults in this country are too overweight for military service. Many individuals who want to serve are not even able to enlist. America needs more fit young men and women to meet its recruiting needs for a modern military. It is critical for our state's leaders to work together to help more young people be physically active and offer this generation a healthier future.

HOW TO HELP KIDS WALK, BIKE AND BECOME MORE ACTIVE

Weight gain occurs when calories consumed exceed the amount of energy expended. In addition to changing eating habits, increasing time spent on physical activity can help prevent youth from gaining excess weight while building strong bones, muscles and tendons.²⁰

Using the time that children spend traveling to and from school, the store, a friend's house or the park can be an effective way to increase kids' physical activity. A recent study found that walking or biking to school can provide children with an additional 16 minutes of moderate or vigorous physical activity daily.²¹

\$1 BILLION A YEAR TO TREAT WEIGHT-RELATED DISEASES

The military's TRICARE health insurance system serves active duty personnel, reservists, retirees and their dependents. It spends well over \$1 billion a year to treat weight-related diseases such as diabetes and heart disease.¹⁹ Many of those costs could be eliminated once America becomes more proactive in helping all its citizens to routinely become more active and consume less calories.



Teens who live in poor or mostly minority neighborhoods are 50% less likely to have a recreational facility near home.

SOURCE: Active Living Research, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation; Gordon-Larsen et al. 2006. http://activelivingresearch.org/files/ALR_Infographic_Communities_June2012.jpg

Yet in the past four decades, from 1969 to 2009, the percentage of kids walking or biking to school dropped from 48 percent to 13 percent.²²

Increased distances between homes and schools can explain only part of this decline. In fact, half of all students in the U.S. still live within three miles of their school. One-fifth of all students live within a mile.²³

BUILDING SCHOOLS WITHIN NEIGHBORHOODS

Building schools within neighborhoods can help. Students who live a half mile to a mile away from their school are 4x more likely to walk to school than students who live 1-2 miles away.²⁴

Researchers speculate that the decline in walking or biking to school is due to other factors, including a perceived lack of safety and a lack of safe walking and biking routes with sidewalks, crosswalks, bike paths, bike lanes, wide shoulders on roads, signage, markings and traffic lights. Relatively small investments can help improve these conditions and, when combined with the necessary education efforts, help children and their parents become more active.²⁵

Community and city planning is an important part of the equation. Research shows that walking and biking

infrastructure is more effective at increasing physical activity when communities have:

- 1 neighborhoods that are intermixed with shopping areas, schools and parks;
- 2 highly connected streets without many cul-de-sacs or dead ends; and
- 3 less land between houses and housing units (building up, not out).²⁶

MAKING THE HEALTHY CHOICE THE EASY CHOICE

Some communities have already started making these important changes.

Minneapolis-Saint Paul made a big push to adopt bicycle and walking infrastructure since becoming one of four pilot metropolitan areas to take part in the Nonmotorized Transportation Pilot Program created by Congress in 2005. Their initiative, called Bike Walk Twin Cities, included 75 miles of new sidewalks and bike paths throughout the area and slow-speed streets that give bikes priority over cars. The initiative reported a 78 percent increase in biking and 16 percent increase in walking from 2007 to 2013.²⁷ In addition, the number of people who bike to work in Minneapolis rose from 2.5 percent to 4.5 percent from 2006 to 2012 and, in St. Paul, from one percent to 1.4 percent in the same time frame.²⁸

Many states have improved active transportation to school through Safe Routes to School programs. These programs aim to increase the number of children walking and biking to and from school by improving infrastructure and implementing educational programs. They also encourage parents and community leaders to get involved—both in walking and biking with students to school and in educational efforts. In California, Safe Routes to School programs in many counties have been associated with large increases in students walking to school and decreases in being driven to school.²⁹

Portland, Oregon has actively promoted bicycle use since its creation of a “Master Bicycle Plan” in 1996 and that spurred investments in over 300 miles of bike paths and lanes. Over

50%

Streets with bike lanes had **injury rates 50 percent lower** than roads with no bike infrastructure.³⁰

71%

Roadways with shoulders at least 4 feet wide experienced a **71 percent reduction in struck pedestrian crashes** with automobiles.³¹



the next 10 years, the number of people who biked to work in the city rose from one percent to almost six percent. In addition, bicycle use on Portland's four bicycle-friendly bridges has grown 322 percent since 1991, while automotive trips have not increased at all.



The largest bike garage in Germany holds 3,500 bikes. The Netherlands is building one to hold 12,500 bikes.

The city's planning goal is to have a quarter of all trips made by bicycle in 2030.³² According to the state's Safe Routes to School program, approximately 42 percent of Portland's students now walk or bike to school.³³

Northwestern Europe is one of the most advanced regions in the world when it comes to bike-friendly infrastructure. For example, bicycle parking garages at commuter train stations in Germany and the Netherlands

are widely available and can hold thousands of bikes.³⁴ Approximately two-thirds of young students in the Netherlands and more than 75 percent of older students bike to school.³⁵

CREATING A HEALTHIER AMERICA

The author of *Prescription for a Healthy Nation*, Tom Farley, has it right when he says, "physical activity has been engineered out of our world." We need to engineer it back in. Young people do not need to run marathons or even have a gym membership to be healthy, but they do have to build routine physical activity into their lives just like brushing their teeth.³⁶

The retired admirals and generals of MISSION: READINESS recommend:

- Securing increased funding for infrastructure improvements to the routes children use to walk and bike to school, such as sidewalks, bike paths and marked street crossings, and for programs that promote safety and increased physical activity.
- Evaluating the effectiveness of initiatives by securing funding to keep track of walking and biking volume. Support the testing of different programs and collection of measurable results.
- Using long-term community and city planning to develop mixed land use, street connectivity and higher density housing so communities are not just relying on short-term fixes, but are increasingly engineered to make the healthy choice the easy choice.

By supporting more active transportation options to encourage walking and biking, Minnesota can help improve children's health and our nation's future. Getting children to walk and bike more really is an issue of national security.

ENDNOTES

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