**Unfit to Fight**

A follow-up to our “Too Fat to Fight” report

Retired Military Leaders Want Congress to Finish the Job of Getting Unhealthy Food Out of Our Schools and PE Back In

**Summary:** Mission: Readiness has been warning Congress that childhood obesity rates have tripled over the past 30 years and approximately one in four 17- to 24-year-olds in the United States is too overweight to serve in the military. In response, Congress passed the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is proposing new regulations on what can be served in school breakfasts and lunches.

In order to reduce obesity and strengthen national security, Congress must support the USDA in their effort to implement science-based meal standards and ensure that schools have the support they need to meet heightened standards. Moving forward, schools will need support ranging from training and technical assistance to grants for the purchase of new equipment in order to serve more nutritious and appetizing meals.

Congress should also start encouraging states and local school districts to get Physical Education (PE) back in the schools so more children are physically fit. More physical activity could help young people control their weight and build the strong muscles and bones they will need to avoid sprains and stress fractures if they choose to join the military.

Yet, only 22 percent of high school seniors have PE daily and many who do have PE classes get little exercise in those classes. We need more accurate information on the quantity and quality of PE being offered by schools. Congress can start addressing the problem by getting school districts to report what they are doing.

Our recommendations to Congress: get the unhealthy food out of our schools and nutritious food in, and start encouraging states and localities to get PE back into our schools.

Over a ten-year period, the number of states with 40 percent or more of young adults overweight or obese went from 2 to 43.

**Percentage of 18- to 24-year-olds overweight or obese**

- Insufficient data
- 39% or lower
- 40% or higher

*Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System. If states were missing data for one or more years, data from 1996, 2000, 2005 or 2006 were used to generate a pooled average for three years in order to have large enough samples. Only states with enough data in both periods were included. Alaska did not have data for either period and Arizona did not have data for the later period. Percents rounded to nearest whole number.*
America’s Military Leaders are Sounding the Alarm Again on Nutrition and Physical Fitness

Military leaders have spoken out before to make sure America’s youth had proper nutrition for a healthy start in life. During World War II, the military discovered that at least 40 percent of rejected recruits were turned away for reasons related to poor nutrition. The National School Lunch Program, established in 1946 upon the recommendation of the military and others, helped improve the health and well-being of our nation by making sure children across America had access to healthy meals at school.

A new threat: one in four young adults is too overweight to join. Surveys done for the Army’s Accessions Command, which carries the responsibility for recruiting and the initial training of new Army recruits, and for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) show that about one in four young Americans is too heavy to join the military.

The CDC’s estimates of who is overweight or obese are alarming: The military makes allowances for young people who have extra muscle, not fat, or those who are close to the desired weight and can lose some of their excess weight in boot camp. So some potential recruits may still qualify who fall into the overweight category using the simple weight to height ratio – the Body Mass Index (BMI) – routinely used in national and state surveys. Using those more typical cutoffs, the CDC’s Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System found that 43 percent of young American adults 18- to 24-years-old—11 million people—were either overweight or obese.

To be within the healthy weight range, a BMI of under 25, those young people would have to lose almost 400 million total pounds. That is the equivalent of over 3,000 Abrams tanks.

By any measure—the military’s or various CDC surveys—it is beyond question that too many young people in America are overweight or obese. [See the United States maps of CDC data.] Within just a ten-year period ending in 2009, the number of states reporting that 40 percent or more of their young adults were overweight or obese went from just two states to 43.

Largely because of this epidemic of obesity, one team of scientists has warned that today’s children may be the first generation of Americans to live shorter lives than...

Seventy-five percent of Americans 17-to 24-years-old are unable to join the military for one or more reasons. A quarter of young Americans are currently not graduating from high school on time, and nearly one in four of those who do graduate and try to join are not able to score well enough on the military’s entrance exam. Another ten percent of Americans cannot join the military because of their criminal records. Some have other disqualifiers keeping them out and some have multiple overlapping reasons why they cannot join.

When weight problems are combined with educational deficits, criminal records and other disqualifiers such as asthma or drug abuse, 75 percent of Americans 17- to 24-years of age are unable to join the military for one or more reasons. The military will need to have more fit young men and women if it is going to keep finding enough recruits with the excellent qualifications needed for a modern military.

The severe recession has temporarily reduced the challenges the nation’s 15,000 military recruiters face in meeting their quotas for signing up qualified individuals. But recruiters remember the recent past when they could not sign up enough young men and women to meet the nation’s military needs.
their parents, and recent data indicate this may already be happening in some counties. Young people’s problems with their weight can begin early. American childhood obesity rates have accelerated faster than adult obesity rates. Over the past 30 years, while adult rates of obesity have doubled, childhood obesity rates have tripled. The *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* reported “almost one-third of American children – nearly 23 million children and teens – are either overweight or obese.”

**Physical Fitness Can Cut Fat and Build Strong Muscles and Bones**

While excess calorie consumption, not reductions in physical activity, are primarily responsible for the current epidemic of obesity, better physical fitness is crucial for addressing this epidemic. Here are three clear facts:

- Many young Americans do not exercise enough: Researchers reported in *JAMA* that at 9 years old, almost all children were well above the recommended 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity, but by 15 years of age only 31 percent met the guidelines during weekdays. Other data shows that only 22 percent of American high school seniors have PE daily.

- More exercise combined with healthier eating habits can help young Americans maintain healthy weights. Exercise alone is unlikely to make up for drinking sugary sodas, but exercise combined with healthier eating habits can help young people maintain a healthy weight.

- Those who do not exercise enough do not do as well in the military. For example, in one study, males who could not do 11 pushups in a minute when entering boot camp failed to complete boot camp with their peers three times more often than fit recruits.

Recruits who are too fat or unfit have more injuries. The military tried using slightly overweight recruits who could pass a fitness test, but found that they were 47 percent more likely to have a sprain, stress fracture or other overuse injury during boot camp than similarly fit recruits who were not overweight. Those injuries are important because they force many recruits to repeat boot camp or leave the military, and nearly a quarter of all air evacuations to Germany from Iraq or Afghanistan are for such injuries – more than the proportion accounted for by combat injuries. The military needs more recruits who have kept their weight under control and are physically active.

**Schools Can Play an Important Role in Reversing the Obesity Epidemic**

In order to address obesity and fitness, it is important to start early. The journal *Health Affairs* reported that “80 percent of children who were overweight at ages 10-15 were obese at age 25.” What children eat and drink at school is critically important because many children get up to half of their daily calories from meals at school.

America has had a big problem with what kids were eating in school. One study showed vending machines were available in 21 percent of elementary schools, 62 percent of middle schools and 86 percent of high schools, and most of those machines served unhealthy snacks. Too often, school meals are not much better:

- New, healthier standards are on the way, but the USDA reported that 90 percent of schools serve meals not meeting America’s current nutritional standards.
- Fried potatoes or chips make up 22 percent of all the vegetables children eat at school.
- Whole grains make up just five percent of breads, rolls or bagels on school menus.
- The most popular entrée item offered daily in high school lunches is pizza.

**Crucial Next Steps for Congress**

In order to reduce obesity and strengthen national security, Congress must keep the promise it made through passage of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act. It can do this by:

**Supporting the USDA** in their effort to implement science-based meal standards required by the Act.

**Ensuring that schools have the support they need to meet heightened standards.** Moving forward, schools will need supports ranging from training and technical assistance to grants for the purchase of new equipment in order to serve more nutritious meals that will teach kids that healthier meals can also be appetizing.

**Reporting on the quantity and quality of PE.** Through education reform, the federal government can encourage states and local school districts to get PE back in the schools, starting with reporting on the quantity of PE that kids are
receiving as compared to national standards, as well as the quality of that PE. That will empower parents to work with policymakers at the state and local level to decide whether their districts are doing enough to combat the epidemic of childhood obesity and make rational policy choices.

Conclusion

After World War II, military leaders sounded the alarm about the health of America’s children. The President and Congress heeded that warning by enacting the National School Lunch Program. Now, retired military leaders have again sounded the alarm, and Congress responded by passing the new Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act. This year, however, Congress needs to make sure the USDA knows it has the support of Congress in making the changes called for by the Act. Moving forward, Congress will have to help schools address training and equipment issues to ensure that schools can serve healthy and appetizing meals. Our schools should also report on the quantity and quality of the PE they offer.

The United States military stands ready to protect the American people, but if we do not help ensure that future generations grow up to be healthy and fit, that will become increasingly difficult. The health of our children and our national security are both at risk. Decisive action by Congress is still needed.

Endnotes

2. Center of Accessions Research (CAR), United States Army Accessions Command, Fort Knox, KY, data provided by Lt. Colonel Gregory Laren, Chief, Marketing and Research Analysis Division, February 25, 2010. Casiday, J. & Macken, J.C. (2011). Draft for use: The implications of being obese for US military recruitment. Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research. The Accession Command’s estimate that 27 percent of 17- to 24-year-old Americans are too heavy to join a based on a survey conducted by the Los Angeles Group in 2005. The National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) study is an analysis of data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES study). The NBER analysis looks at eligibility rates for males and females based on BMI and body fat and exclusion criteria for the different services. Based on NBER’s analysis, the study concludes that approximate 1.3 percent of all enlistments of adults eligible by age were too heavy to join the Army because of excess body fat. Taking both studies into account, the NBER analysis of NHANES data and the Accession Command’s analysis, we conclude that approximately one quarter of young Americans would be too heavy to join the military if they were to do so.
5. The tank estimate is from: MT Abrams main battle tank. Retrieved on March 29, 2011 from http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/systems/ground/mt-4s1-specs.htm. One tank weighs 60 tons, or 120,000. 200 pounds. That must be lost equals 32,000 pounds. That will roughly equal a 266 pound male recruit.

Acknowledgments

“80 percent of children who were overweight at ages 10-15 were obese at age 25.”

Source: Frieden, Dietz, & Collins, 2010, Health Affairs