

Overview

- The U.S. Army failed to achieve its recruiting goal for FY2022 by a staggering 25%—15,000 recruits short of its requirement.
- As delayed entry program recruits are expedited to fill the current shortfall, the subsequent year's anticipated recruit pool will shrink further. This creates an even larger gap that compounds year over year. The continuing shortfall will outpace the military's replacement rate over time, reducing the size of the force significantly and resulting in an inability for the military to remain mission effective across all of its obligations.
- A mere 23% of Americans ages 17-24 and thus in prime recruiting age are eligible for military service, due to various disqualifications. Overweight or obesity is the greatest single disqualifier, and it is a chronic condition that can be addressed.

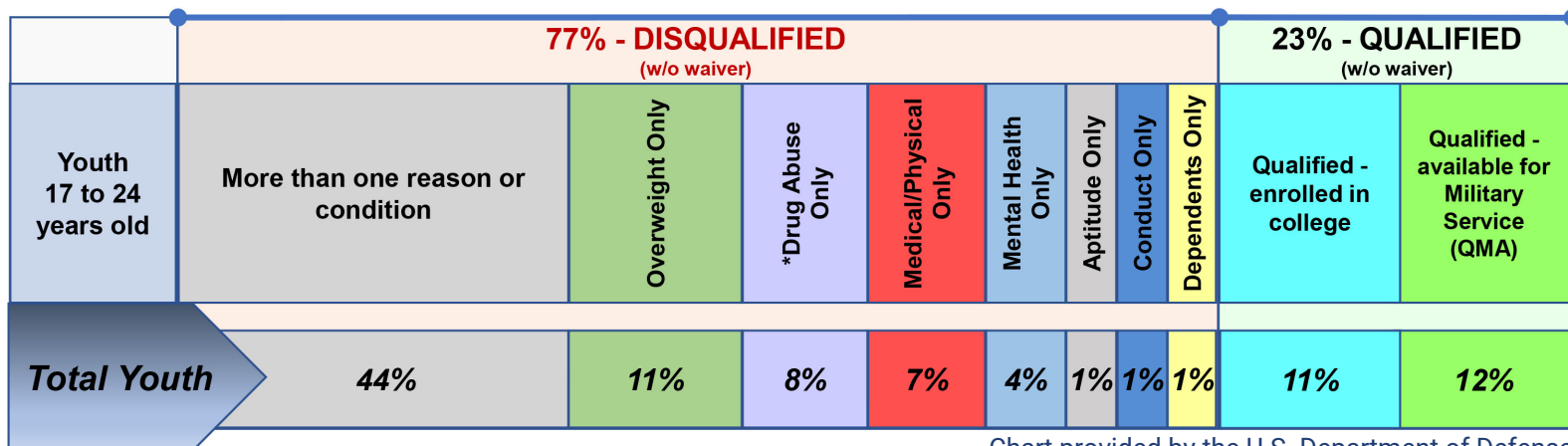


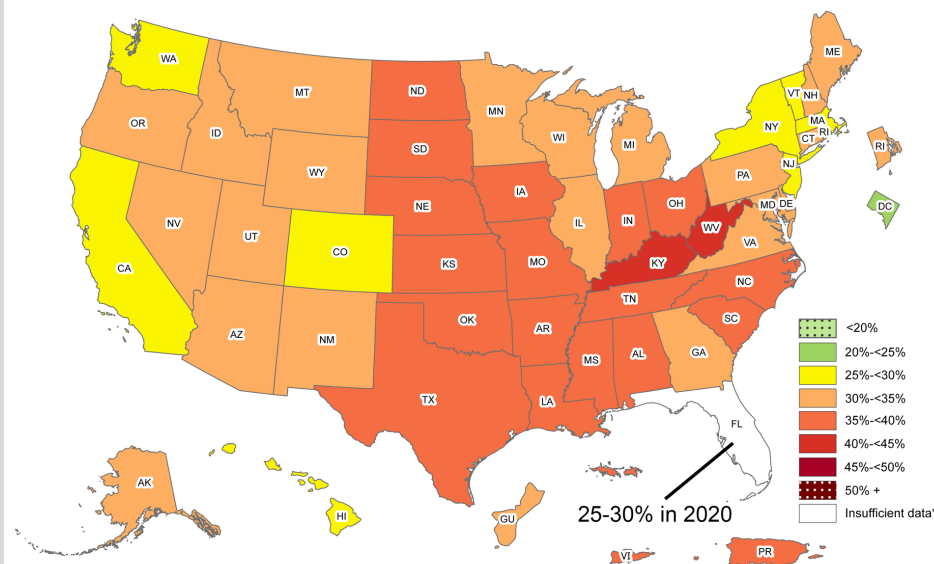
Chart provided by the U.S. Department of Defense

The Worsening Obesity Epidemic and its Impact on the Military

- A dwindling number of Americans are eligible for military service. This can be partially rectified by properly addressing the increasing problem of overweight and obesity in America.
- A recent study showed that in April 2021, over 19% of the active duty military was reported as having obesity.
- Obesity is a complex chronic disease that is increasingly affecting more Americans, one in which genetics, the environment, socio-economics, behaviors, and biology are all important factors. The pervasive misconception that a person's body weight is entirely within an individual's control and that obesity results primarily from individual choices negatively impacts a patient's mental and physical health.
- It is estimated that nearly half of the adult population will be living with obesity by 2030. In 2018, almost 33% of those in the 18-25 prime recruiting age bracket had obesity, increasing from a mere 6% in 1978.

- Maternal obesity during pregnancy increases the likeliness of childhood obesity by factor of over 2.5. Over time, increasing rates of maternal obesity compound as more children are born predisposed to having overweight or obesity, who may then in-turn have children who are more likely to have obesity.
- The COVID-19 pandemic appears to have exacerbated these obesity trends. In an American Psychological Association survey conducted in February 2021, 42% of respondents reported undesired weight gain averaging around 29 pounds, while 10% reported weight gain greater than 50 pounds.

2021 CDC Data on Obesity Prevalance by State and Territory



- If trends in overweight and obesity continue, especially amongst the populations which are or will soon be within military service age, the military may no longer be able recruit enough personnel to fulfill its national security obligations. Increasing reliance on a smaller number of combat-ready troops to secure U.S. policy objectives will place increased mental and physical wear on those forces, likely increasing overall attrition in the size of the force as those individuals exit the service.



Available Solutions

Expand Pre-Accession Military Fitness Programs if Effective

- Recruiters commonly work with potential recruits who do not yet meet military weight qualifications to get them to an acceptable weight, but these efforts are inconsistent, and more clarity is needed on the various efforts being pursued. If particular efforts are effective, they should be identified and expanded, and best practices from these programs or efforts should become standard.
- The Army has launched and expanded the Future Soldier Preparatory Course to engage potential recruits in a pre-bootcamp workout regimen and bring their test scores up or body weight down to qualifying levels within a specific amount of time. In terms of fitness, 87% of students in the pilot program of this course graduated within 3 weeks, losing an average of 1% body fat per week. The dedicated effort of the Army's Future Soldier Preparatory Course may prove to be a model other services can follow, but is only targeted towards a specific subset of potential overweight recruits.

Increase Physical Fitness of Our Youth

- It has long been recommended that adolescents engage in 60 minutes of physical activity per day. Those who engage in less than 60 minutes per day have a significantly higher risk of becoming overweight or obese.
- Numerous studies show that physical activity can have a positive effect on academic performance, and that there is no negative impact. This is particularly notable as students are seeing increasing amounts of sedentary periods.
- Middle and high schools should retain mandatory physical education programs. In-line with recruiting goals, JROTC programs should be expanded.

Increase Access to Available Medical Treatment

- Obesity is a disease and is medically treatable. The military and policymakers should consider ways by which treatment options, in consultation with a medical doctor, can be made more readily available for the benefit of active-duty personnel, reservists, and potential recruits. This treatment could benefit the size of the recruiting pool and increase the overall fitness of the military, ultimately decreasing additional medical costs attributable to weight related diseases.
- Coverage and accessibility for available treatments under healthcare plans, including Medicare, require review in light of advancement in treatment options. For example, new FDA-approved medications are available that have been proven to effectively fight obesity, but aren't always covered by insurance. Coverage and access under a major program like Medicare could provide guidelines for other insurers to follow, and create more equitable access to treatment for those in need. In consultation with a medical doctor and with lifestyle changes, treatments like medications can help to get candidates with overweight or obesity down to a qualifying weight for enlistment.

Expand the Culture around Fitness and Nutrition, Including through Social Media, Technology, and Apps

- New thinking is needed about what motivates fitness and nutrition, and how technology, social media, and software can be used to encourage and enable a culture of fitness. Social media companies could alter algorithms to promote more health and fitness oriented content, or enable "parental lock" type features that require users to complete certain physical activities before granting access.
- Social media influencers may be powerful help in improving public behavior around nutrition and exercise practices, particularly as they have large followings, often by youth who are or will be in the target demographic for military recruiting. A careful balance is necessary to avoid crossing the line of healthy habits vs. unintentionally encouraging unhealthy practices to meet impossible beauty standards.

Align Fitness Standards to Meet Actual Requirements of Intended Military Occupational Specialties

- Many military-aged Americans are excluded from military eligibility due to their weight and fitness though they may possess the education, skills, and physical suitability for various mission critical duties. The idea that every soldier or Marine needs to be a rifleman first is outdated thinking that is no longer reflective of the battlespace in which our military is operating. For instance, a drone operator or accountant simply does not need to be as physically fit as those headed into infantry roles.
- The qualifications and training applied to individual recruits should be tailored to the requirements of their intended position, just as is done in the private sector. This is a more efficient use of resources than conducting training that is not relevant to that individual's duties.

Increase Non-Combat Automation

- In order to maintain its mission readiness, the Armed Forces will need find ways to do the same amount of work or more with fewer people, which is likely to include relying on greater levels of non-combat automation. This may ease the pressure on recruiting efforts.
- Some non-combat duties, like certain forms of maintenance, can plausibly be fulfilled by machines, freeing up scarce personnel to perform other tasks, or augmenting their ability to complete the tasks at hand.

Improve Pay

- For many entering the military as an E1 private, the military base pay is below the minimum wage for an equivalent full-time job in their state. The free market is drawing potential recruits elsewhere.
- While recruits do get benefits, enlistment bonus, and other perks, these must be balanced against the dangerous nature of the duty, the major lifestyle changes, and the appeal of other less risky careers.

For more detailed information, please see ASP's 2022 report: [Obesity's Increasing Threat to Military Readiness](#).

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