

Obesity and Other Problems Barring Teens from Military Service Need National Attention, Leaders Say



A U.S. Army Recruiter motivates young football players as they conduct a team workout, during a week-long team building event organized by the U.S. Army Recruiters in Bloomington, Minn., June 22-26, 2020. (U.S. Army/Juan Jimenez)

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Military leaders are worried about the shrinking pool of young people who qualify for military service, with some calling on the acting defense secretary to take immediate action.

More than 70% of young Americans remain unable to join the military due to obesity, education problems, or crime and drug records. Turning that around should be an issue of national importance, said Rear Adm. Dennis Velez, the head of [Navy](#) Recruiting Command.

"It is something that, as a nation, we should continue to work though ... to make sure our children are healthier," he said.

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Mission: Readiness, a group of close to 800 retired generals and admirals, agrees. They've asked Acting Defense Secretary Christopher C. Miller to immediately stand up a multi-agency task force to assess how the government can fix the problems leaving so many young people unable to serve in uniform.

"Without coordinated action, these trends pose a significant threat to the future of the all-volunteer force," the group [wrote in a letter to Miller](#) last week.

The leaders are calling on the Defense Department to work with the departments of Agriculture, Education, Health and Human Services and Justice to help address the issues. It matches a recommendation in the 2021 defense policy bill in which lawmakers called for the defense secretary to work with other federal departments to address problems affecting the military's ability to recruit new service members.

Defense officials did not immediately respond to questions about whether Miller will immediately assemble the task force. Mission: Readiness said many of the factors leaving young people unable to serve fall outside the DoD's purview.

"We believe this is a critical step to the sustainability of the all-volunteer force and critical for our future strength and national security," the group wrote.

Maj. Gen. Jason Bohm, the head of [Marine Corps](#) Recruiting Service, said far fewer than 30% of young people are eligible to serve in that branch.

"If you break it down further into those skill sets, intelligence level, and the physical ability level, those that we're looking toward bringing into the Marine Corps ... quickly decreases to about 7%," he said.

"That's enormously challenging."

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