

Most U.S. youths unfit to serve, data show

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U.S. military-age youth are increasingly unfit to serve — mostly because they're in such lousy shape.

According to the latest Pentagon figures, a full 35 percent, or more than one-third, of the roughly 31.2 million Americans aged 17 to 24 are unqualified for military service because of physical and medical issues. And, said Curt Gilroy, the Pentagon's director of accessions, "the major component of this is obesity. We have an obesity crisis in the country. There's no question about it."

The Pentagon draws its data from the Centers for Disease Control, which regularly tracks obesity. The steadily rising trend is not good news for military recruiters, despite their recent successes, nor for the overall health of the U.S. population.

In 1987, according to the CDC, a mere 6 percent of 18- to 34-year-olds, or about 1 out of 20, were obese. In 2008, 22 years later, 23 percent of that age group — almost 1 out of 4 — was considered to be obese.

The CDC measures obesity by [body mass index](#), a figure calculated from height and weight that is considered a reliable indicator of body fatness for most people. According to the CDC, the body mass index for a man standing 6 feet, 2 inches tall and weighing 170 pounds is 21.8; the normal range lies between 18.5 and 24.9. Below that range is considered underweight; a BMI of 25 to 29.9 is considered overweight. A person with a body mass index of 30 or greater is considered to be obese.

Obese individuals are at increased risk for a number of diseases and health conditions, including hypertension, Type 2 diabetes, coronary heart disease, stroke, some cancers and other problems, according to the CDC. In addition to those concerns, the military rejects obese recruits in part because so much extra weight likely couldn't be dropped during the course of basic training — even if they could get through the entire program.

"Kids are just not able to do push-ups," Gilroy said. "And they can't do pull-ups. And they can't run."

The reasons are "almost common knowledge, Gilroy said — what he called "the couch potato syndrome" and the widespread elimination of scholastic physical fitness programs.

MISSION: READINESS

In a study being released Thursday in Washington, Education Secretary Arne Duncan and a group of retired military officers led by former Army Gen. Wesley Clark will sound the alarm bells and call young Americans' relative lack of overall fitness for military duty a national security threat. The group, Mission: Readiness, will release a report that draws on Pentagon data showing that 75 percent of the nation's 17- to 24-year-olds are ineligible for service for a variety of reasons.

Put another way, only 4.7 million of the 31.2 million 17- to 24-year-olds in a 2007 survey are eligible to enlist, according to a periodic survey commissioned by the Pentagon. This group includes those who have scored in the top

four categories on the Armed Forces Qualification Test, or AQFT; eligible college graduates; and qualified college students.

According to the Pentagon, the ineligible population breaks down this way:

*Medical/physical problems, 35 percent.

*Illegal drug use, 18 percent.

*Mental Category V (the lowest 10 percent of the population), 9 percent.

*Too many dependents under age 18, 6 percent.

*Criminal record, 5 percent.

WAIVERS

Some conditions or situations can be waived or are periodically loosened by the services, as is the case with certain medical conditions, such as asthma. Waiverable examples include limited marijuana use and having too many dependents. For example, the Pentagon says a waiver is required when an applicant is married and has more than two dependents under 18, or is unmarried and has custody of any dependents under 18. Waiver policies vary depending on the needs of the service.

The group of potential enlistees is further slimmed by the “propensity to serve” among American youths, which social scientists say also is declining. According to Gilroy, research shows that about 12 percent of all U.S. military-eligible youth show an interest in military service.

The Pentagon just finished a record year for recruiting. Every active and reserve component met or exceeded both their numeric and quality recruiting goals for fiscal 2009. Each easily exceeded the Pentagon goal of having at least 90 percent of recruits be high school graduates, and having 60 percent or more score at or above the 50th percentile on the AFQT.

But the weak economy has helped, as has increased spending on recruiting. And given the ever-shrinking pool of potential candidates, concern grows. Bill Carr, undersecretary of defense for military personnel policy, says that to maintain the force, the military has to attract more than 15 percent of qualified young Americans.

The difference is, to some degree, made up through the use of waivers. About 1 in 5 recruits still requires a waiver of some sort to enter the service, with about two-thirds for conduct and one-third for medical issues, Carr said