# **Military leaders fear America’s youth can’t make the cut**

When the U.S. military decided in January to drop a long-standing ban against women serving in combat roles, it was not just doing it to be fair -- it was doing it to help solve a recruitment problem.

In an interview on National Public Radio (NPR), General Martin Dempsey said, “I think it’s fairly common knowledge that our population of military-age young men who qualify for the military is declining.”

## Drugs, Dropouts And Arrests

According to the NPR report, too many young men are disqualified from joining the military because they have had trouble with the law, lack a high-school diploma or have used drugs.

Recruits must have a clean criminal record, pass a drug test and meet academic requirements. For young American men, these standards are getting harder to meet. NPR pointed out that in all 50 states, more boys than girls drop out of school. Young men also account for three-fourths of all arrests in the United States.

Since the majority of people applying to the armed forces are male, this represents a thorny problem for military recruiters who are trying to meet their enlistment goals.

## Young Women Wanted

The military realized that if this trend continued, by 2020 there would not be enough male recruits to fill the ranks. So it decided it needed to increase female recruitment. By opening up ground combat roles to women, it’s hoped the military can attract more female applicants by showing that women can have just as successful careers in the military as men.

Ground combat units, which include jobs like operating a tank or firing mortars, have been off-limits to female troops. The jobs are tough and dangerous, but serving in those units is often a requirement for certain leadership roles in the military.

Still, the plan to open ground combat jobs to women will not solve all the military’s recruitment problems. Female soldiers and Marines must pass exhausting training courses and have superior fitness levels to be admitted to these units.

## Fighting Fat

Fitness is yet another hurdle for would-be recruits. American youth are suffering from an obesity crisis. According to the Department of Defense, 27 percent of Americans aged 17 to 24 are too heavy to serve in the military.

When combined with the number of people who are disqualified for academic, criminal and drug-related reasons, only one in four young Americans is eligible to join the military. Not having enough recruits threatens U.S. military readiness -- the ability of the armed forces to respond to threats and accomplish their missions.

## Basic Training Starts In Pre-K

A group of senior retired military leaders was so concerned about recruitment, it decided to do something. The group formed an organization called Mission: Readiness to foster better fitness and education for American youth.

According to the group, U.S. national security depends not just on having enough missiles and fighter jets, but also enough preschools and gym classes.

Retired Major General John Libby, who headed the Maine National Guard, wrote in "The Kennebec Journal" that 19 percent of Maine high school students failed the Army’s entrance exam. Preparing them for the test cannot start at 17 or 18, he wrote. “We must start with high-quality early education such as pre-kindergarten and Head Start.”

Libby pointed out that preschool teaches children self-discipline, motivation and the ability to be a team player -- all of which are required in the military.

## Junk Food Threat

The retired generals of Mission: Readiness also argue that junk food is just as much a threat to national security as foreign enemies. In their report "Still Too Fat to Fight," they pointed out that 400 billion calories are consumed by children annually from junk food sold in schools. That is equal to nearly 2 billion candy bars, more than the weight of an aircraft carrier.

Mission: Readiness also called on state and federal lawmakers to require schools to increase the quality and quantity of physical education in schools. Gym class is often one of the first subjects sacrificed as school districts cope with shrinking budgets. Only 31 percent of American high school students have a daily gym class, according to the Centers for Disease Control. Just six states -- Massachusetts, Illinois, Hawaii, Mississippi, Vermont and New York -- require PE classes for grades K-12.

In December, Lieutenant General Mark Hertling gave a speech, “Obesity is a National Security Issue,” in which he described how recruits often struggle during basic training and suffer injuries. He blames years of junk food, excessive hours spent in front of screens and lack of regular physical activity.

“This is not something the Army can fix,” he told the audience. “Be fearless, in terms of writing your schools. Be fearless in trying to get nutrition back in restaurants. Be fearless in balancing your lives and getting out to exercise.”