

Report: 77% Of Youth Are Ineligible For Military Service

by Sean Noble
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SPRINGFIELD - More than three-quarters of young Americans cannot qualify for service in the armed forces for a variety of health, academic, and behavioral reasons — a growing national-security challenge that demands immediate action, according to a group of retired Illinois military leaders.

One action they recommend, in releasing [a new report](#) on the topic: Heading-off such challenges with the help of greater investments in young children's learning and

development. This includes the early care and education increases Gov. Pritzker has proposed for the FY24 state budget, as well as further improvements in Illinois' system of birth-to-5 supports as envisioned by a bipartisan state commission.

“We need to help more kids graduate from high school, fully ready and well-skilled for whatever path they choose to pursue next in life — whether that be further education and training, workforce entry, or service in our nation's military,” said Major General (ret.) William Enyart, U.S. Army, of Belleville. Gen. Enyart is a member of the nonprofit Mission: Readiness organization of military leaders, who issued the report that was discussed Thursday in a hearing of the Illinois House Veterans' Affairs Committee.

“Investments in high-quality early childhood services for our youngest learners are critical to ensure all Illinois children are prepared for the future — meaning our state and nation will be well-prepared, too,” added Major General (ret.) William Cobetto, U. S. Air Force, of Hillsboro.

Mission: Readiness consists of nearly 800 retired admirals and generals across the country, all concerned with protecting and strengthening national security via research-proven investments in children and youth. Their new report is based on alarming data from the U.S. Department of Defense, showing that 77% of young Americans — aged 17 to 24 — are ineligible for military service. That's an alarming, 6-percentage-point increase since 2017.

While there are no state-specific data available, Illinois matched the previous, national figure for military ineligibility six years ago; the same could be expected today, the generals said. The reasons for ineligibility are varied, and relate to:

- **Physical health factors**, including obesity — In Illinois, nearly one-third of young adults are too overweight to qualify for the armed forces. Yet such problems actually begin much earlier in life; the obesity rate among 2- to 5-year-olds in our state is 13%.
- **Academic factors** — Military service requires a high school diploma or GED. However, nearly one in eight Illinois students fails to graduate within four years, a figure that increases to one in five among low-income students. Plus, statewide, about seven out of 10 incoming kindergarteners are unprepared for school success — another early indicator of possible later-in-life challenges.
- **Social and behavioral factors**, such as substance abuse and criminal records — Nearly 9% of Illinoisans aged 12 to 17 report using drugs in the past month. Meanwhile, Illinoisans 18 to 24 years of age comprise 15% of the adult population, but 33% of adult arrests.

“These disqualifiers are a serious and growing threat to our country’s military preparedness, at a time we can ill-afford it,” said Brigadier General (ret.) Roger Machut, U.S. Marine Corps, of Elgin. “This is an all-hands-on-deck emergency.”

“We should meet this crisis with every proven and promising means available to us, getting out-front of these disqualifiers by helping kids from their most formative years,” added Major General (ret.) Gary Dylewski, U.S. Air Force, Peoria. The FY24 state budget represents one avenue for effecting positive change, he said, particularly through early care and education programs that can lay a foundation for healthy physical, cognitive, social-emotional development.

Mission: Readiness members support the Smart Start investments the Governor has proposed for strengthening preschool, child care, and key birth-to-3 programs in order to reach more families seeking their help for young children. Bolstering the compensation, training, and support of the early childhood workforce is a vital component of — in turn — boosting services’ access, equity, and quality.

In addition, the retired military leaders voiced support for tapping another possible funding source to aid such programs: Funding from the settlement of national lawsuits against opioid manufacturers and distributors — hundreds of millions of dollars intended for drug prevention, treatment and remediation purposes.

High-quality home-visiting programs for new and expecting parents have been shown to help reduce the Adverse Childhood Experiences often correlated with young children developing later-in-life problems involving drugs and other challenges. Meanwhile, Early Intervention (EI) therapies help infants and toddlers facing developmental delays and disabilities, often the result of early exposure to opioids.

Illinois House Resolution 37 / Senate Resolution 36 reflect Mission: Readiness’ hopes for the opioid-settlement funding decisions, which take place outside the state’s typical appropriations process; these measures encourage Illinois leaders to make EI and home-visiting services a priority in such decisions.