



MEMORANDUM

Date: October 6, 2020

To: REDC

From: Center Road Solutions

RE: Mission: Readiness: 2020 National Report Release “Breaking Point: Child Malnutrition Imperils America’s National Security”

On September 24, a distinguished panel of Mission: Readiness members including Rear Admiral Kathleen Dussault, Rear Admiral Jamie Barnett, Major General Marcia Anderson; and U.S. Army, Major General Ed Tonini; U.S. Air Force gathered to discuss the new national report “*Breaking Point: Child Malnutrition Imperils America’s National Security.*” The report highlights how the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened food insecurity and how childhood malnutrition longitudinally affects their ability to serve in the military.

Key Takeaways:

- 75% of young Americans are interested in the military, but 71% are disqualified from serving.
- Obesity is one of the major barriers to the U.S.’s ability to enlist and deploy fit service members.
- The connection between food insecurity and malnutrition perpetuate the issue of obesity.
- COVID-19 pandemic is estimated to cause 18 million children to experience food insecurity.

Question & Answer Discussion:

Question 1: How have military recruitment challenges evolved over the last 11 years?

Admiral Barnett:

- We have seen military recruiting reach a breaking point. 71% of young Americans are not eligible for military service, even though 75% of them are interested in the military. As the military grows in complexity, we must continue to recruit the best of the best.
- Among the largest disqualifiers is obesity, disqualifying 31% of youth from serving.

Question 2: What are the big findings and takeaways from this report?

Maj. General Anderson:

- There is widespread lack of access to nutritious food, directly contributing to obesity. COVID-19 has exacerbated this issue. Many children are not at school, so they’re not getting the nutrition from schools they used to. School lunches were the original program for national security.
- Many people think food insecurity and malnutrition are urban problems, but they are not. We need these kids to be strong so they can be eligible for the military 18-20 years later.

Question 3: Mission: Readiness conducted a survey along with this report. How does it fit in?

Admiral Dussault:

- One of the big statistics from the survey is that proportionally, not many people serve in the military—about 1% of the population. But it still creates a civil- military divide where each side doesn’t understand the culture of the other.
- Nutrition deficiency is one of the biggest reasons why youth are not qualified for service. Today, malnutrition isn’t thinness—it looks like obesity. Obesity is especially dangerous because it combines nutrition deficiency with immense strain on young bodies. Obesity is a big factor in your body’s ability to fight off new diseases, such as COVID-19.
- 41% of American adults are considered obese. The scariest statistic is that 25% of infants and children are also considered obese.

Question 4: As adjunct general of Kentucky, how do these barriers to military enlistment come into play during an economic downturn?

Maj. General Tonini:

- I'm a big believer that all of the emphasis points in Mission: Readiness start in early childhood—whether that be education, nutrition, or respect for law enforcement.
- We were fortunate in Kentucky when it comes to military manning levels. However, the rate of disqualification is also a bit higher in Kentucky than that of the national average, so it was a very interesting and challenging process to recruit and enlist members.

Question 5: Why is it so important to start focusing on nutrition and health so early on in life to be fit for the military?

Maj. General Anderson:

- At one point in my career, I was privileged enough to command basic training. What we discovered across the board is that there was an increase in stress fractures, particularly for our female recruits. These issues likely started for them 15 years ago, when they didn't receive enough calcium, iron, etc.

Question 6: An interesting word used to describe those who are overweight or obese is “malnutrition.” Why did you settle on that word choice?

Admiral Dussault

- Obesity is not too much of a good thing; it's too much of a bad thing. Also, being overfed puts much more strain on the body and its ability to fight off infections than being underfed.

Question 7: COVID-19 has exposed some shortcomings in the federal nutrition programs, especially in schools. Why do you think now is such an urgent time to fix these issues?

Maj. General Tonini

- Back when kids were back in school, it was easy to feed the kids nutritious meals because they were all in one building. The building has been the core element of success of the school lunch program, but now those buildings are empty in many counties.

Maj. General Anderson

- Especially in rural communities, school is often the only place where kids are guaranteed nutritious meals. Food insecurity has risen to 18 million children during the pandemic.

Question 8: What innovative solutions to this problem have you seen during the pandemic?

Maj. General Tonini:

- A lot of it falls on volunteerism, and unfortunately when the issues persists for a long time, volunteerism has a tendency to wane. Then, it becomes about funding. At Mission: Readiness, we try to emphasize that it all boil down to the need for more funding. Transportation is expensive, and when it's not all centered in a school, it gets costly.

Maj. General Anderson:

- Food pantries in Wisconsin have created mobile resources to bring the food out to those who need it. A bipartisan piece of legislation addressing this is the Meals on Wheels for Kids Act ([H.R. 6968](#)). We need both local and congressional action.

Question 9: Is there a significant cost barrier to the school lunch program?

Admiral Dussault:

- There is always a difference between what we want to make happen and what we can afford. Fortunately, there is a growing awareness that early childhood nutrition and eating habits are tied to national security and will impact the next generation.

Maj. General Tonini:

- The dramatic spike in unemployment and underemployment during COVID-19 has grown the need for sufficient childhood nutrition programs. Our challenge is to convince leaders and decision makers to address this issue as it impacts national security. There is no urgency like now.