

## Active Modes of Transportation A Matter of National Security?

**The Problem:** The retired admirals and generals of Mission: Readiness are concerned that 71 percent of young Americans are unable to join the military.

Almost one third of all young Americans cannot join because they are overweight.

Obesity rates among children have tripled within three decades, threatening not only the overall health of America, but also the future strength of our military.

It is critical to national security that those willing to serve are prepared to meet the standards for eligibility. However, current obesity rates prevent otherwise eligible young people who are interested in serving from qualifying.

**Data Trends:** Within roughly one generation, two trends have gone in opposite, and dangerous directions:

- 1) A third as many children walk or bike to school, while
- 2) Childhood obesity has tripled, and has quadrupled among 12- to 19-year-olds..

The Lancet, one of the most highly regarded medical journals, reported that physical inactivity, by itself, is the fourth leading cause of death worldwide, “on par with both smoking and obesity.”

Eighty percent of adults in the U. S. do not get the recommended amount of physical activity. Similarly, only 27 percent of high school students get enough exercise during the week.

This is an issue of critical concern to our military. In addition to shrinking the pool of potential recruits, a decline in physical fitness impacts those within the military. In one study, 14 percent of new male Army recruits said they had not exercised or done any sports in a typical week prior to joining. The military can help most recruits increase their physical fitness during boot camp, but of recruits who could not do 11 pushups upon entry, close to half could not complete boot camp.

We also know from military research that less fit recruits are more prone to musculoskeletal injuries such as leg and ankle injuries. In fact, more soldiers were evacuated from Iraq or Afghanistan for serious sprains and fractures than for combat injuries. When a soldier goes down in the field of combat, no one blows a whistle to stop the game: others have to risk their lives to remove him or her from harm’s way.

**The Built Environment:** In the past four decades, from 1969 to 2009, the percentage of kids walking or biking to school dropped from 48 percent to 13 percent.

Increased distances between homes and schools can explain only part of this decline. In fact, half of all students in the U.S. still live within three miles of their school. One-fifth of all students live within a mile.



Researchers speculate that the decline in walking or biking to school is also due to other factors, including a perceived lack of safety and a lack of safe walking and biking routes with sidewalks, crosswalks, bike paths, bike lanes, wide shoulders on roads, signage, markings and traffic lights. Relatively small investments can help improve these conditions and, when combined with the necessary education efforts, help children and their parents become more active.

Built environments that afford safe and convenient walking and biking opportunities between schools, parks, residential neighborhoods and commercial corridors encourage individuals to be more physically active as part of their daily routines. Data from the American Heart Association also shows that for every \$1 spent on building safe bike/pedestrian transportation routes, \$3 in reduced health care costs can result.

**Local Efforts:** Community planning that accounts for active transportation is happening. For example: Philadelphia is investing in bicycle and walking infrastructure such as over 200 miles of bicycle lanes, pedestrian and bicycle access on the 40th Street Bridge, and the Schuylkill River Parks Connector Bridge.. Between 2005 and 2013, commuting by bicycle in Philadelphia increased by 260 percent. The increase in walking and biking among adults and children may be one of the reasons why Philadelphia experienced an impressive 5 percent decline in the obesity rates among its K-12 students.

**Our Position:** As state and federal lawmakers consider transportation funding, the admirals and generals of Mission: Readiness encourage further investment in making roads and communities safer and more accessible for bicycles and pedestrians. Dedicated funding for active transportation projects can help ensure that our transportation system is working to improve public health, curb America's rising obesity epidemic and help ensure future national security.

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