

The Built Environment: Why Investments in Biking and Walking Are Essential to Preserving Military Readiness

The Problem: Today, an astonishing 75 percent of all young Americans between the ages of 17 and 24, the prime age group for military recruitment, are unable to join the armed forces. This alarming data paints a bleak picture for our future military readiness and the success of upcoming generations.



U.S. Department of Defense, 2012

The general lack of physical fitness among our nation's youth is one of the main drivers of this military eligibility issue. Specifically, a large number of potential military recruits are unable to join the armed forces because they do not meet height-to-weight standards. The facts are these:

- Being overweight is the leading medical disqualifier for military service.
- Roughly one quarter of all Americans between the ages of 17 and 24 are too heavy to enlist.
- Between 1995 and 2009, the military reported that 150,000 individuals who showed up for processing failed their entrance physicals due solely to excess body fat.
- In roughly the same period ending in 2010, overweight and obesity rates for 18-24 year olds increased by 29 percent.
- Every year, the military discharges over 1,200 first-term enlistees before their contracts are up due to weight problems; the military must then recruit and train their replacements at a cost of \$50,000 per person, totaling roughly \$60 million annually.

The bottom line is that the armed forces must have a sufficient pool of fit young adults to draw from in order to field enough recruits with the excellent qualifications needed to staff a 21st century military.

The Built Environment: The built environment is fundamentally linked to health and well-being. Since the 1960s, the percent of kids who walk to school has dropped from 4 out of 10 to just about 1 out of 10. Meanwhile, childhood obesity has tripled. Changes to the built environment that make our surroundings more conducive to biking and walking can increase physical activity and promote weight loss.

There are a number of existing federal investments that support biking and walking. For example, the Safe Routes to School Program provides funding to schools and units of local government to implement comprehensive approaches designed to improve safety and encourage physical activity.

- Most of this funding—70 to 90 percent—is used for infrastructure improvements like sidewalks and bike paths.
- The remaining funds are reserved for non-infrastructure investments like safety education and programs that promote increased physical activity, such as “walking school buses.”

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- Safe Routes to School funds are used in all 50 states and the District of Columbia.
 - Since the inception of the program, state transportation departments have disbursed more than 4,300 grant awards, which have benefited an estimated 11,100 schools and 4.8 million children.

Other investments like Transportation Enhancements and the Recreational Trails program provide similar opportunities for states and units of local government to encourage increased physical activity.

Research: Weight gain occurs when calories-in exceed calories-out. The difference between these two values, often referred to as the “energy gap,” is generally small enough in most children for a moderate increase in daily exercise to help lessen weight gain. Walking and biking to school is a proven way to increase physical activity among children. In fact, one study of adolescents found that all of the students who walked to and from school met the recommended levels of 60 or more minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity on weekdays. Investments that encourage biking and walking, like Safe Routes to School programs, have shown positive outcomes in this regard:

Des Plaines, Illinois – Using Safe Routes to School funds, Central School was able to create a school walking route map, hire additional crossing guards, and began the construction of critical infrastructure improvements like new sidewalks and curb extensions. As a result, the rates of children walking and bicycling to Central have more than doubled—rising to 40 percent in 2010 from just 19 percent in 2007.

Alpine, Utah – Alpine Elementary School used Safe Routes to School dollars to build safe walking paths and promote biking and walking through safety education and inventive approaches like walking school buses. These investments were able to help Alpine Elementary increase the number of children biking and walking to school from 32 percent to 50 percent in just one year.

Investments in the built environment that promote biking and walking— like the Safe Routes to School program—cannot turn the obesity problem around overnight. However, these programs are a necessary, if not sufficient, part of ongoing efforts to ensure that more kids are healthier and not overweight.

Policy Opportunities: Biking and walking programs like Safe Routes to School are authorized through surface transportation legislation, the last of which was known as SAFETY-LU (P.L. 109-59). Although this reauthorization expired in 2009, the programs covered by this bill have been maintained by a series of short-term extensions—the most recent of which carries them through the end of March. As Congress prepares to reauthorize surface transportation programs, we ask that members bear in mind the importance of programs that promote increased physical activity. In order to reduce obesity and ensure that more young Americans are fit to serve in the military, Congress should preserve dedicated funding for biking and walking programs like Safe Routes to School.