

A Fresh Start for North Carolina Kids

Increasing access to fresh and nutritious food can help strengthen national security



Acknowledgements

Council for a Strong America is a national, bipartisan nonprofit that unites five organizations comprised of law enforcement leaders, retired admirals and generals, business executives, pastors, and prominent coaches and athletes who promote solutions that ensure our next generation of Americans will be successful, productive members of society.

Mission: Readiness

Retired admirals and generals strengthening national security by ensuring kids stay in school, stay fit, and stay out of trouble

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72%
of North Carolina
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cannot serve in the
military due to issues
such as obesity.

Summary

North Carolina has one of the largest military populations in the country, with four military installations and nearly 130,000 service members throughout the state.¹ Conversely, 72 percent of North Carolina youth between the ages of 17 and 24 cannot serve in the military due to issues such as lack of education, a record of crime or substance abuse, or medical disqualifiers; this is very much in line with the national rate of 71 percent.² Obesity is one of the main medical disqualifiers, and rates of obesity among young people are on the rise.³ In North Carolina, 13.5 percent of children ages 10-17 were obese in 2018, up somewhat from 12.6 percent in 2016. This trend is especially concerning because individuals who would otherwise be eligible to serve are being disqualified due to excess weight.⁴

While childhood obesity rates have increased in recent years, working to ensure that kids have access to fresh and nutritious foods has long been a vital component in keeping children healthy and fit. In 1945, Major General Lewis Hershey, the Director of the Selective Service System, testified to Congress that at least 40 percent of recruits during World War II were rejected for reasons related to poor nutrition. The following year, Congress established the National School Lunch Program as a “measure of national security, to safeguard the health and well-being of the nation’s children” by ensuring they had access to nutritious meals.⁵ In North Carolina, during the 2018-2019 school year, over 835,000 children received healthy, balanced lunches every school day.

Just as the military leaders of the past knew that promoting healthy eating was an

effective way to ensure that the armed forces stayed strong, retired military leaders today believe that increased access to fresh and nutritious food for children throughout all stages of development is a national security imperative.

Today, federal nutrition programs are on the front lines of the battle against childhood obesity. The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), together with the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Nutrition Incentives program and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women Infants and Children (WIC) combat obesity by increasing consistent access to fresh and nutritious food throughout a child's development into young adulthood. This consistent access is critical to the health of our nation and to our national security.

Causes and consequences of poor nutrition

Individuals from all income levels in the United States do not consume enough fresh fruits and vegetables. These poor dietary habits can lead to multiple health issues, including obesity.⁶ In addition to being one of the major disqualifiers for military service, obesity can lead to health issues throughout life. Obesity in childhood can lead to high blood pressure, diabetes, joint problems, asthma, and high cholesterol, as well as an increased risk of obesity in adulthood.⁷

Lack of access to fresh, nutritious foods contributes to obesity and can impact military readiness

Between 1999 and 2016, obesity rates increased significantly for children and adults

throughout the U.S.⁸ In North Carolina, 33 percent of adults, and 13.5 percent of children ages 10-17, were obese in 2018.⁹ These rates are not only a concern for public health, but for national security as well. The health problems caused by obesity in young people can impact their future ability to serve in the armed forces. Improving access to fresh and nutritious foods can improve children's health and reduce obesity, which can strengthen national security by ensuring the military has a healthy pool of recruits.¹⁰

Combating childhood obesity: Improve access to fresh and nutritious foods

Consistent access to fresh and nutritious foods from birth through young adulthood is essential to combating obesity. As of 2017, 20 percent of North Carolina children experienced food

“To ensure kids grow up strong, healthy, and ready for any career they choose, we must provide all North Carolina families with consistent access to fresh and nutritious food.”



**Vice Admiral (Ret.)
John Morgan**
U.S. Navy

insecurity, which the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines as the reduction in the quality, variety, or desirability of diet, or a disruption in eating patterns and reduced food intake due to a household lack of resources, financial or otherwise, necessary to obtain adequate food.¹¹ Children who experience food insecurity are at a higher risk for obesity.¹²

Federal food and nutrition assistance programs work in partnership with states and private nonprofits to address food insecurity and improve access to fresh and nutritious foods for children in the U.S. As annual military recruitment goals are consistently difficult to attain due to disqualifiers, the retired admirals and generals of Mission: Readiness believe that America must prioritize efforts to combat childhood obesity throughout a child's development. Promoting access to fresh, nutritious food among North Carolina's youth will help reduce obesity and give more North Carolinians the ability to pursue their dreams of serving their country.

Summer Food Service Program

The SFSP provides children from low-income families with healthy meals as well as recreation and education programs during the summer. This interwoven approach provides both nutritious meals, thereby combating food insecurity, and educational programming to help combat weight gain. However, only a small fraction of children eligible to receive summer meals are participating. During the summer, food insecurity rates increase because students lose the consistent access to healthy foods that they get during the school year. Studies have shown that increased availability of summer meals helps to reduce food insecurity.¹⁹

During the summer of 2018, only 14 percent of North Carolina children who were eligible for summer meals were able to access them. Nationally, for every seven children who participated in free and reduced-price lunch during the 2017-2018 school year, only one child participated in the SFSP. Between July 2017 and July 2018, national participation in the SFSP decreased by nearly six percent, marking the third year in a row of declining participation rates.²⁰ These numbers illustrate the inconsistent food access that school lunch program participants may experience; they have access to healthy, nutritious food during the school year, but a large majority of students do not during the summer.²¹

It is important to address these decreases in participation and ensure that children are able to get the nutrition they need during the summer months, as well as the rest of the year.²² Increasing the reach of the SFSP could contribute to a reduction in food insecurity. Innovative mobile food dissemination sites, assistance in addressing the financial strain on low-income families over the summer and developing private and community food delivery options should be explored.²³

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

In 2018, SNAP provided benefits that allowed over 40 million Americans nationwide to purchase healthy food. In 2017, the most recent year demographic data was available, children under the age of five accounted for 13 percent of SNAP participants.²⁴ Participation in SNAP has been shown to reduce the prevalence of overweight and obesity among children and adolescents; the program is estimated to reduce childhood obesity by five percent.²⁵



National School Lunch Program

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is the oldest food and nutrition assistance program in the U.S. In North Carolina, during the 2018-2019 school year, over 835,000 children received healthy, balanced lunches every school day.¹³ Congress created the program to provide consistent access to nutritious meals for children at school. The NSLP provides vegetables, fruit, lean protein, whole grains, and low-fat or fat-free milk with each school lunch. Children who participate in NSLP consume fewer empty calories and more fruits and vegetables than their peers who do not eat school lunch. Participation in NSLP is also associated with a lower body mass index.¹⁴ Estimates suggest that free or reduced-price school lunches can reduce the rate of obesity by at least 17 percent.¹⁵

In FY2018, NSLP operated in almost 100,000 pre-K-12 schools and child care facilities throughout the U.S. In 2018, schools around the country served five billion lunches, and many of these meals are being consumed by children who might otherwise have difficulty accessing fresh, nutritious food. Research has shown that children from homes that experience food insecurity were more likely to eat school meals, and received more of their intake of food and nutrients from school meals than children who were food secure.¹⁶

Nearly two-thirds of North Carolina children do not consume the recommended daily amounts of fruits and vegetables, contributing to obesity in the state.¹⁷ The USDA's Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP) encourages kids to try new fruits and vegetables and demonstrates how they can make healthier snack choices. The FFVP currently operates in 218 N.C. schools, helping to prevent obesity among nearly 95,000 students.¹⁸ The exposure to, and education on fruits and vegetables that were not previously part of a child's diet encourages the consumption of served fruits and vegetables in the school lunch program.

However, school meals alone cannot combat the rising rates of obesity and subsequent medical disqualifiers for military service. Other federal programs are crucial to addressing issues of affordability, access, and availability of fresh and nutritious foods for children.

By increasing access and addressing affordability, SNAP helps to provide consistent access to fresh fruits and vegetables for children from low-income families. This vital collaboration between federal, state and non-profit partners contributes to the reduction in childhood obesity among SNAP participating families.

Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children

Healthy nutrition is important at all phases of life, especially before birth and during the first five years of a child's life. Some of the factors that can lead to obesity in childhood include gestational diabetes, excess maternal weight gain during pregnancy, and high birth weight. WIC helps to reduce these risks by providing nutrition education and promoting healthy eating for children under

five years old and pregnant women. Today, WIC focuses on improving access to fresh and nutritious foods in communities where participants live.²⁶

Participation in WIC has been linked to better overall dietary quality, increased fruit and vegetable consumption, and reduced intake of added sugars.²⁷ Between 2010-2016, many WIC agencies across the United States saw decreased rates of obesity in children between two and four years old. During this time period, the percentage of children with obesity enrolled in the program fell from 16 percent in 2010 to 14 percent in 2016; these trends reflect the impact that access to fresh and nutritious foods may have in reducing childhood obesity.²⁸

Such commitments and services integration in the earliest years of a child's life are essential to combating childhood obesity.

Conclusion

Ensuring that all children have consistent access to fresh and nutritious food at all stages of development—prenatally, birth to five, and school-age—is critical to having healthy young adults. Increased investments at the state and federal levels, innovations at the community, state and federal levels, modernization in food delivery, and diversification of access points to fresh and nutritious foods will support children's health and well-being throughout the year.

Over 70 years ago, our military leaders sounded the alarm that nutritional deficiencies in America's youth were affecting military readiness, which led to the first federal nutrition assistance program. Today, as a staggering number of our young adults are not eligible to serve, many because they are too overweight, access to fresh and nutritious foods throughout a child's development must be treated as a key component of our national security. This access is critical to ensuring that our youth grow up healthy and prepared to succeed in the military or at whatever career they choose.

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