

Facing Fitness Crisis, Army Leaders Look to Change Culture

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Officials from U.S. Army Forces Command and U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command are working to fundamentally change the culture of fitness within the Army. Their efforts will impact everyone from the nation's newest recruits to its longest-serving soldiers. U.S. Army photo illustration

The mission of the U.S. [Army](#) is to fight and win the nation's wars.

To that end, soldiers at installations across the globe train each day. They jump from planes. Maneuver across vast training areas. Shoot artillery. Fly helicopters. And drive tanks.

But while soldiers remain largely focused on potential enemies abroad,

there's another fight underway within the ranks themselves.

Officials from U.S. Army Forces Command and U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command said they are working to fundamentally change the culture of fitness within the Army. Their efforts will impact everyone from the nation's newest recruits to its longest-serving soldiers.

Outside of the military, officials are tackling an even greater fitness challenge with what some have called a "looming national security crisis" caused by a [lack of fitness in America's youth](#).

In the Army, the driving force behind the changes is a need to improve readiness. With [deployments](#) in Iraq and Afghanistan ongoing and a renewed focus on training to fight a near-peer threat, officials said soldier fitness is of growing importance.

More than 100,000 soldiers are unable to deploy, officials said. For a large percentage of those soldiers, it is due to injuries sustained during training.

And those soldiers are becoming harder to replace. An improving unemployment rate means fewer potential recruits are turning to the armed forces among a population that is already largely unfit to serve.

A recent Heritage Foundation report found that, according to 2017 Pentagon data, "71 percent of young Americans between 17 and 24 are ineligible to serve in the United States military." Nearly one-third of those young Americans are too overweight for military service.

"Put another way: Over 24 million of the 34 million people of that age group cannot join the [armed forces](#) -- even if they wanted to," said retired Lt. Gen. Thomas Spoehr and Bridget Handy, who authored the report, "The Looming National Security Crisis: Young Americans Unable to Serve in the Military."

The fitness of recruits is [even more concerning in the South](#), which has traditionally been where the Army is most likely to find its force.

A recent study led by The Citadel in South Carolina in collaboration with the U.S. Army Public Health Center and the American Heart Association found that recruits from 10 Southern states -- Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee and Texas -- are "significantly less fit, and consequently are more likely to encounter training related injuries than recruits from other U.S. states."

Those 10 states have accounted for more than 37 percent of the Army's new recruits in recent years, according to data from U.S. Army Recruiting Command.

The Citadel study found that recruits from those states are 22 percent to 28 percent more likely to be injured, with each recruit lost to injury estimated to cost the Defense Department approximately \$31,000.

Within the Army's current force, its fight for fitness is occurring on several fronts.

Forces Command, based at [Fort Bragg](#), is developing a new tool to help leaders assess the combat fitness of their troops.

The commanding general of Forces Command, Gen. Robert B. "Abe" Abrams, has been a vocal leader in pushing fitness across the force and often participates in physical training while visiting units across the nation.

"I believe it is time to make a fundamental change in the way we train physical fitness," Abrams said.

Sixteen years of war have shown that the rigors of ground combat require every soldier to be fit, but current physical fitness tests fail to measure all areas of fitness, he said. The Army needed a new test that can drive changes necessary to better optimize soldier's fitness, improving the readiness of the Army's formations.

Another major Army command, [Fort Eustis](#), Virginia-based Training and Doctrine Command, is [developing a replacement for the Army Physical Fitness Test](#), while also working to introduce new standards for recruits and revamp training at the start of military careers. Officials are developing new doctrine, regulations and policies related to physical fitness.

The four-star commands -- along with other Army organizations -- are cooperating on what the Army calls its Holistic Health and Fitness initiative.

That initiative, years in the making, would include the creation of Soldier Performance Readiness Centers that would embed strength and conditioning coaches, physical therapists, nutritionists, sports psychologists, counselors and others within combat units.

Maj. Gen. Malcolm B. Frost, the commanding general for TRADOC's Center for Initial Military Training, said the efforts amount to "a generational shift in how the U.S. Army conducts fitness."

Soldiers are the Army's greatest weapon, Frost said, and they should be cared for and maintained just as the Army would care for any other weapon.

The Army has an entire system of armorers, mechanics and training ranges to ensure weapons are in top condition. But when it comes to soldiers -- "We don't have much" outside of Morale, Welfare and Recreation gyms and centralized medical facilities, Frost said.

He said the SPRCs -- pronounced "Sparks" -- would be a training range for the human body and the mind with a goal of ultimately preventing injuries and speeding up rehabilitation.

Frost said the full costs of the efforts are not yet known -- dependent on decisions not yet made by the chief of staff of the Army and the secretary of the Army -- but would represent an investment in the Army's future.

"I am absolutely confident that the investment we make in this will pale in comparison to the costs if we don't," he said.

The Center for Initial Military Training has a team of researchers, scientists and experts from the medical and physical fitness communities working on driving change across the Army. They get help from Forces Command, Army Medical Command, Army Special Operations Command and many others.

Michael S. McGurk, director of research and analysis at the Center for Initial Military Training, said the Army wants to avoid breaking the force through injuries or attrition caused by driving soldiers away. At the same time, the Army can't afford to only recruit the highest talent. There simply aren't enough people available.

Instead, he said, the Army must focus on building its force -- by recruiting the best quality soldiers it can and giving them what they need to improve.

That means monitoring nutrition, sleep, mental stress and spiritual well-being, as well as ensuring soldiers have the proper equipment to train their bodies as part of a one-stop shop for soldier fitness.

"All these things tie together because they're all related," McGurk said.

Part of the problem with the Army's existing culture of fitness lies with its most common measure of health -- the Army Physical Fitness Test.

The Army has used physical fitness tests in one form or another since 1858, when a test was first developed for cadets at the [U.S. Military Academy](#) at West Point, New York. Tests and standards have fluctuated since. The current Army Physical Fitness Test, or APFT, was introduced in 1980 and has remained largely unchanged. It consists of two minutes of push-ups, two minutes of sit-ups and a two-mile run.

Col. Mike Kirkpatrick, director of leader development at Forces Command, said too often soldiers train specifically to do well on the APFT. That can lead to overuse injuries and take up time better spent training for the rigors of combat.

Kirkpatrick said Forces Command was developing the Soldier Readiness Test as a commander's tool to assess a unit's physical fitness program.

The Soldier Readiness Test must be completed by soldiers while wearing their [Army Combat Uniform](#), boots and fully body armor. The events include a 225-pound tire flip, an agility test, a 240-pound dummy drag, a sandbag toss over a 7-foot barrier, a sandbag stack and a one-and-a-half mile run.

Kirkpatrick said a pilot program featuring the test was completed late last year. The pilot included troops with the 20th Engineer Brigade at Fort Bragg.

Based on feedback, Forces Command is refining parts of the SRT before further testing later this year, Kirkpatrick said. At the same time, the command will expand the test to even more battalions across the Army.

Meanwhile, TRADOC is developing the Army Combat Readiness Test that could eventually replace the APFT. The new, six-event test is designed to gauge five components of physical fitness, including muscular and cardiovascular endurance, strength, speed and explosive power. It consists of a deadlift, standing power throw, modified pushups, a sprint/drag/carry lane

that simulates moving a wounded soldier or ammunition in combat, leg lifts and a two-mile run.

But to affect change on the largest scale, officials outside the Army warn that a much larger effort is needed to improve fitness across the country.

Daniel Bornstein, the exercise and sport science professor who authored the Citadel study on threats to military readiness and public health, said the issue of unfit youth is a big problem that the military has little hope of changing on its own.

"Military leaders have known this to be a problem for decades," he said.

"They've been doing everything they can to solve this problem from the point of entry into the military forward."

"They have been making changes to the manner in which they carry out basic training in efforts to minimize the rate of injury. They have really done everything they can to make lemonade out of lemons," Bornstein added. "The reality is they are getting a lot of lemons."

Bornstein said the study, titled "Which U.S. States Pose the Greatest Threats to Military Readiness and Public Health? Public Health Policy Implications for a Cross-sectional Investigation of Cardiorespiratory Fitness, Body Mass Index, and Injuries Among U.S. Army Recruits," was the result of a four-year effort.

The research was published in the Journal of Public Health Management and Practice last month.

Bornstein looked at fitness levels and injuries on a state by state basis to see if state and regional health trends in the South had an impact on Army recruits.

The rates of diabetes and heart disease and certain cancers are much greater in the South than they are in the rest of the country, he said. And the rates of obesity and physical inactivity are also significantly higher than in other states.

Bornstein, who created a course at the Citadel on physical activity and national security, said he was interested to find how those rates might affect Army recruits. He was not surprised by the results, because he sees something similar on a smaller scale at the Citadel.

New cadets at the military college are increasingly entering school less physically fit, he said. In response, the school has begun working with cadets to improve physical training programs and are stressing fitness as one of the school's pillars.

The Army recruits most heavily from southern states. But it's also where many of the country's long-running fitness troubles are worst.

"We've been telling people for 20 years that they should get more physical activity to improve health," Bornstein said. "Although it is the military's problem, it is not a problem they can solve. It really is society's problem to solve."

The Citadel professor said he hoped the states identified through this analysis, along with federal entities, will work to establish policies and environments proven to support physically active lifestyles.

"There are serious problems for military readiness and national security," Bornstein added. "And we have the answers. If we as a country and as individual states implemented the policy recommendations we would solve this problem."

The Heritage Foundation report, released earlier this month, outlines the stakes of having a population largely unfit to serve.

"The U.S. military is already having a hard time attracting enough qualified volunteers. Of the four services, the Army has the greatest annual need. The Army anticipates problems with meeting its 2018 goal to enlist 80,000 qualified volunteers, even with increased bonuses and incentives," according to the report.

Frost, the commander of the Center for Initial Military Training, has called the inability to man the military "the next existential threat we have."

Frost said the Army introduced the Occupational Physical Assessment Test, or OPAT, in part, to encourage recruits to begin physically training for the Army before they report to basic training. The test was introduced early last year for new Army recruits and soldiers changing military occupational specialties.

It measures a recruit's physical aptitude through four events -- a standing long jump, seated power throw, deadlift and interval run -- in much the same way that the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery, or [ASVAB](#), measures mental aptitude.

Before the OPAT, the Army did not have a true physical entrance requirement, Frost said. "Quite frankly, it was the strength that it took you to open the door to the recruiting center."

It's too early to know for sure, but Frost said there is some evidence that the test is having an impact by ensuring recruits are physically prepared for the rigors of the Army jobs they want. Since the test was introduced last year, the Army lost 1,400 fewer soldiers to attrition during basic training than past averages.

McGurk said the OPAT also could have a deeper impact, helping to change a mindset among recruits.

In the past, someone might have joined the Army assuming that 10 weeks of basic training and anywhere from four to 26 weeks of Advanced Individual Training would help get him into the shape needed to serve, he said. But the OPAT encourages recruits to get into shape before basic training in order to be successful in their training.

McGurk compared it to being on a soccer team.

"If you want to be a good soccer player, you can't show up on the first day of school and be good," he said. "There's six weeks of practice before the season started. We're kind of bringing that idea around to the Army ... it's preseason for basic training."

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