



Young Mississippians:
**Ready, Willing,
And Unable
To Serve**

75 Percent of Young Adults Cannot
Join the Military

Early Education across Mississippi is
Needed to Ensure National Security

A Report by



MISSION: READINESS
MILITARY LEADERS FOR KIDS



A Message from America's Retired Generals, Admirals and Civilian Military Leaders:

Mississippians have always answered the call to military service. Thousands of young men and women from throughout the state have put their lives on the line in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Unfortunately, many young people who want to join cannot enlist. Startling statistics released by the Pentagon show that 75 percent of young people ages 17 to 24 would be unable to enlist in the United States military if they visited a recruiter today. Three of the most common barriers for potential recruits are failure to graduate high school, a criminal record, and physical fitness issues, including obesity.

The United States military requires rigorous eligibility standards because it needs competent, healthy and educated individuals to staff the world's most professional and technologically advanced military. The best aircraft, ships and satellite-guided weaponry alone will not be enough to keep our country strong. To ensure a strong, capable fighting force for the future, America's youth must succeed academically, graduate from high school, be fit, and obey the law. That is why retired military leaders are joining together to launch MISSION: READINESS.

In Mississippi, more than a third of young people do not graduate from high school on time. The best-proven investment to help kids graduate from high school starts early: high-quality early education for at-risk kids. It also helps kids stay away from crime and succeed in life.

Our recommendation to state and federal policymakers is to ensure that all of Mississippi's at-risk children have access to high-quality pre-kindergarten. While 36 percent of four-year-olds are served by the federally-funded Head Start program, Mississippi is one of the few states in the country with no state pre-kindergarten program. A high-quality pre-kindergarten program is the best way to make certain that more young Mississippians will meet the tough standards of the United States military and the Mississippi National Guard, should they choose to serve. A strong commitment today to high-quality early education will keep America strong and safe tomorrow.

Very Respectfully,

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Young Mississippians: Ready, Willing and Unable to Serve

75 percent of Mississippi's young adults cannot join the military
Early education is needed to ensure national security

The Pentagon reports that 75 percent of Americans aged 17 to 24 are ineligible to serve in our military. The reasons behind this are serious and – if left unaddressed – will adversely affect the strength of our military. In the interest of national security, we must understand and deal with these problems.

Introduction

Three Crucial Reasons Why Young Americans Cannot Join:

Although there may be multiple reasons why an individual is ineligible to serve in the military, three of the most significant reasons are inadequate education, a criminal background, or excess weight.

Inadequate education: Approximately **one out of four** young Americans lacks a high school diploma. Students who have received a general equivalency degree (GED) can sometimes receive a waiver if they score well enough on the military's entrance exam. However, most of those who dropped out and received a GED instead of a regular degree do not possess sufficient math or reading skills to qualify.

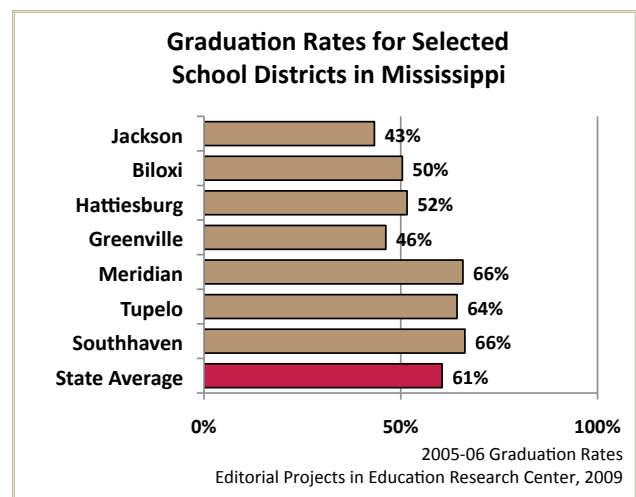
Mississippi's high school dropout problem is alarming: statewide, more than a third of ninth graders fail to graduate from high school within four years, according to one frequently cited analysis. For example, in Jackson and Hattiesburg, ninth graders graduate on time at a rate of just 43 percent and 52 percent, respectively.¹

Not only are too many young people failing to graduate, many of those who do graduate still lack the academic skills necessary to take their place alongside others in the workforce or in the military.

The "Nation's Report Card," the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), reports that in 2007, 78 percent of Mississippi's eighth graders scored below the proficiency level in reading, and 85 percent scored below the proficiency level in math.²

"One in 38 adults is under correctional control in Mississippi."

– Pew Center on the States



Even with a high school degree, many potential recruits still fail the Armed Forces Qualification Test (the AFQT) and cannot join. The test is used by the military to determine math and reading skills. Nationwide, about 30 percent of potential recruits with a high school degree take the test and fail it.³

Criminality: One in 10 young adults cannot join because they have at least one prior conviction for a felony or serious misdemeanor (and for five percent of young adults, trouble with the law is the only thing keeping them out).⁴

To illustrate how serious the crime problem is in Mississippi, there were more than 100,000 arrests for crimes in Mississippi in 2008 and almost 2,000 arrests for violent crimes.⁵ One in 38 adults was under correctional control in Mississippi – in jail, in prison, or on probation or parole, in 2007.⁶ Juvenile crime is also a serious problem in the state, with over 10,000 juvenile arrests in Mississippi in 2008.⁷

Weight problems: 27 percent of young Americans are too overweight to join the military.⁸ Many are turned away by recruiters and others never even try to join, but of those who attempt to join, since 1995 over 140,000 individuals nationwide have failed their entrance physicals because they were too overweight.⁹



“Our men and women in uniform are the best in the world. But the sophistication of our military is increasing every year so we will soon need even better-qualified recruits. Unfortunately, the number of young Americans who have high-school degrees, are in good physical shape, and are without criminal records is declining. To keep our country strong and safe, we need to ensure all young Americans get the right start in life – we need more investments in high-quality early education.”

Henry “Hugh” Shelton
General, US Army (Ret.)

Former Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff

Over the last three years of data for the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) Behavior Risk Factor Surveillance System, the average number of military-age 18- to 24-year-olds who were overweight or obese in Mississippi was over 50 percent. Mississippi was one of only three states with rates over 50 percent.¹⁰ So, the number of enlistment-age young adults in Mississippi who cannot join the military because of weight problems – currently 27 percent nationally – is almost surely higher in Mississippi, even though the military is more forgiving of those whom it declares to be overweight than the CDC.¹¹

Additional reasons beyond those three: Many young people are disqualified from serving for various health problems, such as asthma, eyesight or hearing problems, mental health issues, or recent treatment for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorders.

Others are not eligible because they have drug or alcohol problems, are too tall, too short, or have other non-medical reasons making them ineligible. For example, single parents with custody of a child cannot join. The cut-off points for different service branches vary on many standards.

Multiple problems: Solving one problem is often not enough to allow someone to join. For example, some of the overweight individuals are also involved in crime or have other medical problems that would disqualify them even if they were to lose enough weight.

Fewer waivers in 2009 but... During economic downturns, the military is better able to find well-qualified recruits and can temporarily rely less on waivers for those with academic deficits or criminal records.¹² But a weak economy is no formula for a strong military. Once the economy begins to grow significantly again, the challenge of finding enough high-quality recruits will return. Unless we help more young people get on the right track today, our future military readiness will be put at risk.

In summary: When all the requirements are considered, only about two out of 10 young people are fully eligible to join the

Army without any waivers, according to the Army’s Accessions Command.¹³ The number of others who are eligible with waivers depends on the service branch and where they draw the lines on waivers for educational deficits, legal offenses or health problems. Curtis Gilroy, the Pentagon’s accessions policy director, has testified that **75 percent of young Americans have problems that will keep them from joining the military.**¹⁴

Quality early education increases graduation rates and cuts crime

Other MISSION: READINESS reports will discuss health issues, but this report is focused on what can be done to increase graduation rates and cut crime. Over 40 years of research on early education programs has found they successfully address both problems.

Research shows that early education builds a foundation for future learning

Ninety percent of a person’s adult brain weight is achieved by age five.¹⁵ According to the Institute of Medicine book *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*, brain scans and neuroscience have now shown conclusively that the best time to influence a child’s trajectory in life is during the child’s earliest years when the architecture of their brain is literally under construction. Changes in neurons, connections and structures in the brain continue throughout life, but the most important changes come during the 0-5 years:

What happens during the first months and years of life matters a lot, not because this period of development provides an indelible blueprint for adult well-being, but because it sets either a sturdy or fragile stage for what follows.¹⁶

“Quality early education increases graduation rates by as much as 44 percent.

– Schweinhart, 2005



And “school readiness skills” are more than just learning the ABC’s or knowing how to count. Young children also need to learn to share, wait their turn, follow directions, and build relationships. This is when children begin to develop a conscience – differentiating right from wrong – and when they start learning to stick with a task until it is completed. The Nobel-prize-winning economist James Heckman, who studies economic productivity, argues that these early social skills are crucial for future success in school and later in life. As Heckman explains, success builds on success. Unfortunately, failure also begets failure.¹⁷

The solid research behind early education

Those who have served in leadership positions in the United States military recognize that it is imperative that the military be able to field not just highly competent individuals who can operate high-tech machinery and computer systems. The military also needs individuals who will have the ability to work in teams and the excellent judgment needed to successfully carry out their duties while deployed on active duty. That cannot be acquired just in basic training.

Carefully designed studies have followed children in high-quality early learning programs for decades. The resulting research has shown that children in the programs had higher rates of high school graduation and lower rates of arrest than the study participants who did not receive the preschool programs.¹⁸

In fact, in a review of well-researched studies of school reforms that measured graduation rates, early education had the most solid evidence showing it could deliver strong results.¹⁹

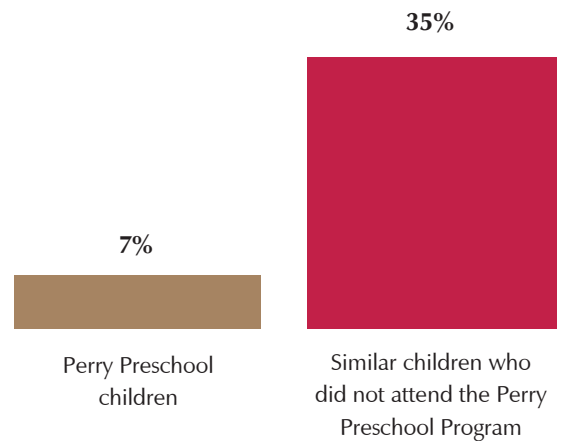
Evidence supporting pre-kindergarten for at-risk children came from a randomized-controlled study following children in the **High/Scope Perry Preschool Project** in Ypsilanti, Michigan. Beginning in 1962, preschool teachers worked intensively with low-income children ages 3 and 4. The children attended preschool during the week and teachers came to their homes once a week to coach their parents on appropriate parenting skills. Researchers followed the children up to age 40, comparing their life experiences with the children who did not participate in the early education program. The contrast was stark.

Almost half of the preschool participants were performing at grade level by the age of 14, compared with just 15 percent of the children in the control group; and 44 percent more of the children in the Perry program went on to graduate from high school.²⁰

By age 27, at-risk three- and four-year-olds left out of the Perry Preschool program were five times more likely to be chronic offenders than similar children who attended the program. Significant and meaningful differences in life outcomes continued through age 40.²¹

QUALITY EARLY ED CUTS FUTURE CRIME

Chronic lawbreakers at age 27



At-risk 3- and 4-year olds randomly excluded from the High/Scope Perry Preschool Program were five times more likely to become chronic offenders (more than four arrests) by age 27.

The **Child-Parent Center (CPC)** pre-kindergarten program has served over 100,000 at-risk, inner-city children in Chicago. By the age of 18, children left out of the program were 70 percent more likely than program participants to have been arrested for a violent crime. An outstanding charge or conviction for a violent crime usually prevents a young person from enlisting in the military.²² The children left out of the program were also almost twice as likely to be placed in foster care as those in the program.²³

By age 20, participants in CPC were 29 percent more likely to have graduated from high school, and by age 24 were 11 percent more likely to have either attended college or to have been working steadily than those left out of the preschool program.²⁴

Evidence that beginning as early as possible is important

The **Abecedarian** home visitation and preschool program randomly assigned children from impoverished families living in a small Southern town to either a full-day, enriched preschool program at a child center, or to no intervention. The children began in the program as infants (usually at 4 months) and continued receiving high-quality early education up to age five.

Child-Parent Centers: At-risk children left out of quality early education were 70 percent more likely to commit violent crimes.

– Reynolds, 2001



Early Education in the Military

The United States military itself also recognizes the inherent value of early education. The military has been providing high-quality early care and education to the children of personnel at bases around the globe for two decades – in fact, the U.S. military provides the largest employer-sponsored child care program in the world. The military’s Child Development Centers have been recognized for their path-breaking role in this area.²⁷

photo credit: Corporal Monica Erickson

The children *not* in Abecedarian had lower IQ’s at age 12, were 91 percent more likely to be held back in school, and dropped out of high school 48 percent more often. The children served by Abecedarian were nearly three times more likely to be attending a 4-year college at age 21.²⁵

The **Syracuse University Family Development Program** provided weekly home visits and high quality early learning programs to low-income, single-parent families beginning prenatally and lasting through age five. Ten years after the initial study ended, children who were not included in the program were 10 times more likely to have committed a crime than comparable children enrolled in the program (16.7 percent versus 1.5 percent). Furthermore, children not in the program committed more serious crimes, including sexual abuse, robbery, and assault.²⁶

These snapshots over time of the children’s development show that early childhood education and parent coaching can have significant long-term impacts on a person’s success or failure in school and beyond. Research shows that these interventions in the prenatal-to-five years have far-reaching consequences later in life, and all of society benefits.

A strong investment with impressive returns

Not only does early education advance the educational success of students, it also produces solid savings to taxpayers. Disadvantaged children who repeatedly fail in school do not simply disappear. Too often these children grow up to have very troubled lives, and their struggles can be extremely costly to society. Special education, crime, welfare, and other costs cause staggering expenses for the nation’s taxpayers.

Individual children who grow up to drop out of school, abuse drugs and become career criminals cost society, on average, over 2.5 million dollars each.²⁸ There are well over two million convicts in American jails and prisons and over seven million currently in jail, in prison, or on probation or parole.²⁹ So, when a researcher added up all the quantifiable private and public costs, it was not all that surprising that criminal behavior

alone was found to cost Americans \$1.7 trillion a year.³⁰ Because the various costs to society incurred by some of the at-risk kids can be so high, research shows that the benefits of investing in high-quality early childhood education for at-risk kids far outweigh the costs. According to cost benefit studies done of the programs:

Unfortunately, Mississippi is still spending heavily on treating social problems and not enough on preventing them in the first place. For example, while the Chicago Child-Parent Centers have shown that high-quality early education and parent coaching can cut out-of-home placements almost in half, the state and federal governments together are paying over \$83 million a year to identify and care for the victims of abuse or neglect in Mississippi.³³

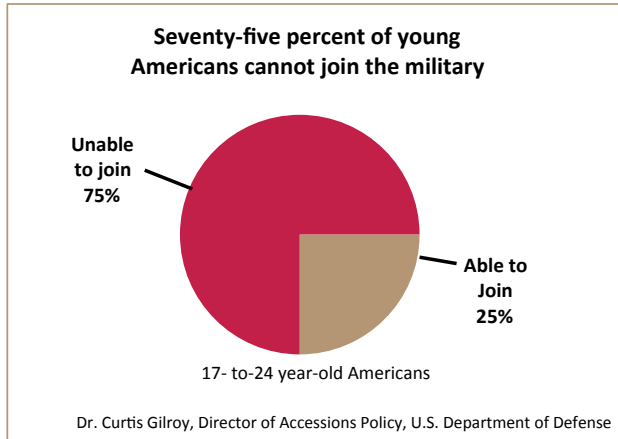
Net Savings from Early Education Investments

High/Scope Perry Preschool	\$244,811 ³¹
Chicago Child-Parent Centers	\$70,977 ³²

Next steps for Mississippi

Mississippi is one of only a handful of states that has no state pre-kindergarten program. Many parents in the state cannot afford to pay for private preschool or quality child care settings, and some can only afford to put their children in a lower-quality setting that may not adequately support children’s development and learning. A year of quality early education costs an estimated \$7,300.³⁴ This is more than the annual tuition of \$5,106 at the University of Mississippi.³⁵

Other Southern states have begun to do a much better job of serving their children with quality care. For example, Louisiana serves 30 percent of its children with pre-kindergarten programs, while Georgia reaches over half of its four-year-olds and Oklahoma’s high-quality program serves seven out of ten four-year-olds.³⁶ Oklahoma is already reaping the benefits with improved test scores in elementary school for its children, especially the minority children served by their program.³⁷



Because of its high levels of poverty, Mississippi is able to serve a large number of its children with federally funded Head Start, reaching 36 percent of four-year-olds and 24 percent of three-year-olds in the state.³⁸ All of those children are from families living below the poverty line, except for about 10 percent of the children who are in the program because they need special education and are eligible for Head Start even if their families are not in poverty. Without any state pre-kindergarten that leaves out roughly two-thirds of four-year-olds and three-quarters of three-year olds in Mississippi – many of whom come from families just above the poverty line who are still at higher risk than other more advantaged children of performing poorly in school.

Individual children who grow up to drop out of school, abuse drugs and become career criminals cost society, on average, over 2.5 million dollars each.

There is another source of federal funding for early education: *The Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG)* is the principal source of federal funding for child care assistance. States are required to provide matching funds and can use these resources to help low-income families pay for early education and after-school services while parents are employed, attending educational or training programs, or looking for work.³⁹ Though the system was designed to help all eligible children, inadequate funding allows only a fraction of children to be served. Nationally, only one in seven eligible children are receiving CCDBG assistance.⁴⁰ In 2008, Federal CCDBG funds provided to Mississippi helped approximately 25,400 low-income children receive care.⁴¹

In fiscal year 2008 the Mississippi legislature and governor approved two million dollars in funding for a voluntary program to implement a quality rating system in sixty Mississippi counties. That effort is called the Mississippi Child Care Quality Step System (MCCQSS). The rating system offers financial incentives for centers to adopt age-appropriate curriculum.⁴²

SPARK Mississippi stands for *Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids*. It is a W. K. Kellogg foundation funded initiative to bring together parents, school and early education providers, advocates, Head Start providers, state and local government personnel and members of the business community to ensure that over 800 Mississippi children ages three to eight succeed in school. The effort seeks to help children master the skills and receive the cognitive, physical, family, and community supports necessary for school success. It already serves the catchment areas of five Mississippi school districts - Cleveland, Hollandale, North Bolivar, Pearl, and Mound Bayou, and is working to expand into the West Bolivar, West Tallahatchie, Humphreys County, East Jasper and Clarksdale school districts.⁴³

Another effort underway with private foundation support is the Mississippi Building Blocks (MBB) program. It is a three-year effort to provide mentors for early care and education programs, along with classroom materials, teacher scholarships, support for parent education and home visiting, and a business advice center.⁴⁴ It is designed to reinforce the state's MCCQSS system.⁴⁵

While these and other efforts are commendable first steps, much greater investments in early care and education are essential to ensure that Mississippi's at-risk young children have access to the high-quality programs that are needed to prepare them for school success and productive lives free of crime.⁴⁶

Conclusion

Early education is an investment in national security

The best aircraft, ships, and satellite-guided weapon systems are only as effective as the personnel the military can recruit to operate them. Just as with our evolving economy, tomorrow's military will need young people who are better prepared than earlier generations for tomorrow's challenges. But the trends are not encouraging. Too many young people are dropping out of school, getting involved in crime, and becoming physically unfit.

This cannot continue. Our military readiness and thus our national security depends on the ability of the upcoming generation to serve. We need to take action now to change our current course.

“Our national security in the year 2030 is absolutely dependent upon what is going on in pre-kindergarten today.”

– Rear Admiral James Barnett,
US Navy (Ret.)



If Members of Congress and state policymakers from Mississippi act now to institute high-quality early care and education programs, they can count on strong support from the retired generals and admirals of MISSION: READINESS.

We fully understand what is at stake. Mississippi can, and must, do a better job of preparing our children for a successful life with many options in adulthood, including a career in the military if they choose to serve. Increased investments in high-quality early education are essential for our national security.



Endnotes

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- 6 Pew Center on the States. (2009). *One in 31: The long reach of American corrections: Mississippi*. Washington, D.C.: Author. Retrieved on April 19, 2010 from http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/uploadedFiles/www.pewcenteronthestates.org/Fact_Sheets/PSPP_1in31_factsheet_MS.pdf
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