

# ANALYSIS OF THE PHYSICAL AND MENTAL IMPACTS OF HEIGHT AND WEIGHT STANDARDS ON MARINES



Naval  
Postgraduate  
School

## Abstract

The Marine Corps currently measures body mass index using standards that date back to the middle of the 20th century, which appear to be no longer applicable to today’s service members. The current policy is influencing Marines to adopt unhealthy lifestyle habits that encourage the use of rapid weight loss techniques in order to meet these standards, which contributes to physical and mental health issues. To learn more about individual Marines’ perceptions of current policy, this study consisted of nine semi-structured interviews with the data collected analyzed to identify any common themes, feelings, and perceptions about the current Marine Corps policy regarding height and weight requirements.

Comparison of Service Eating Disorder Diagnosis Rates, 2013-2017		
Service	Diagnosis Rate (Men)	Diagnosis Rate (Women)
Army	1.2	11.9
Navy	0.8	11.4
Air Force	0.9	10.4
Marine Corps	1.1	20.4

Comparison of Service Eating Disorder Rates, 2013–2017.  
Source: Fleming et al. (2022).

## Methods

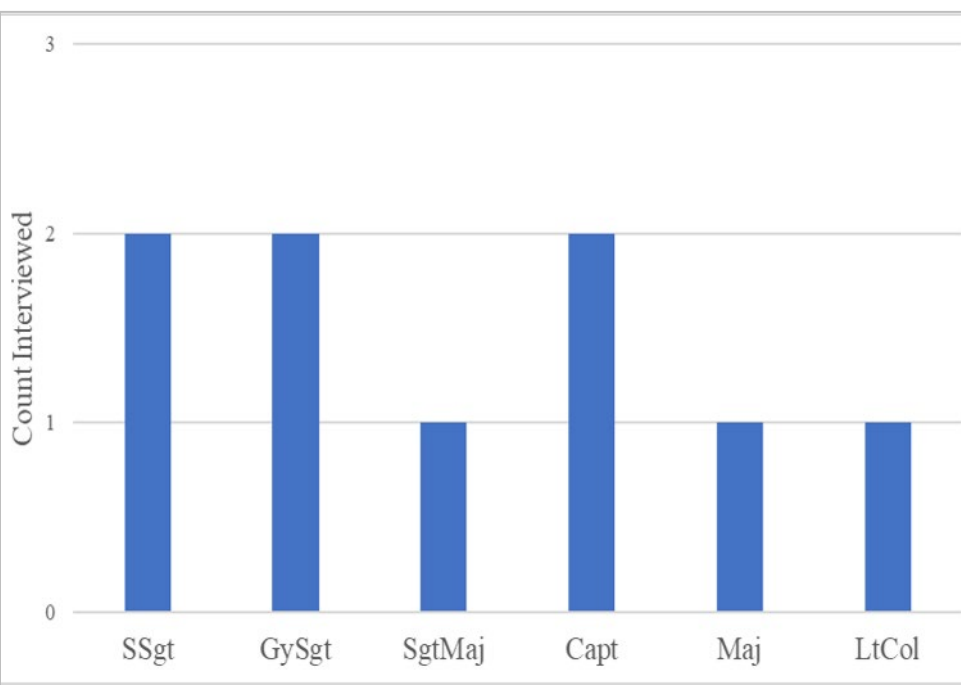
- The researcher conducted nine semi-structured interviews over several weeks.
- All interviews focused on four areas: individual background and Marine Corps career, perceptions and feelings on the physical impacts incurred from adherence to height and weight standards, perceptions and feelings on the psychological impacts incurred from adherence to height and weight standards, thoughts and feelings on current policy, and impacts on further service.
- The time in service for Marines interviewed ranged from 9-20 years.
- All participants were active-duty enlisted Marines and Marine Corps officers.
- They varied in race, age, rank, time in service, MOS, and experience.
- The researcher began the thematic analysis by carefully reading each of the nine interview transcripts and identifying excerpts associated with physical health, psychological health, views on current policy, and continuation of further service.

## Results & Their Impact

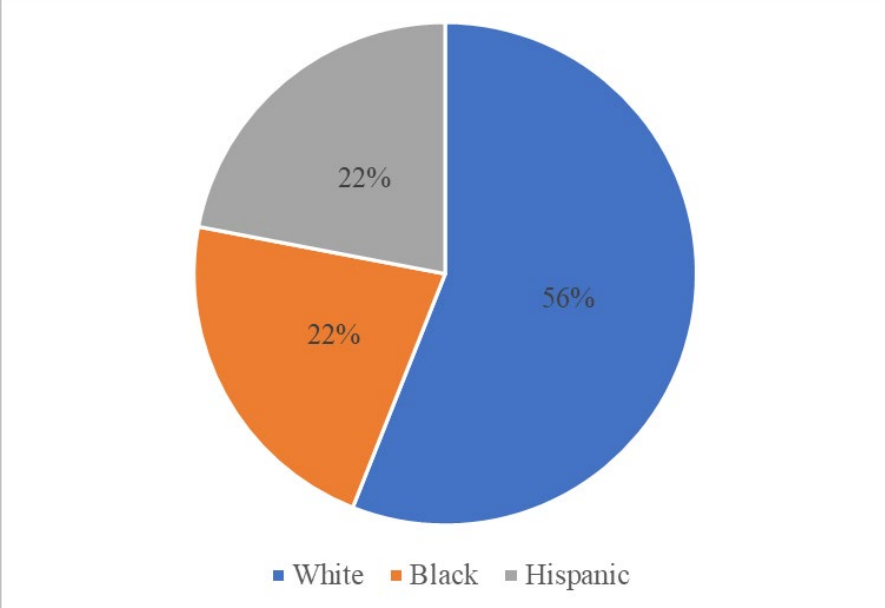
- The research findings suggest that the Marine Corps height and weight standards are impacting Marines. More specifically, they are negatively affecting Marines both physically and psychologically as Marines try to maintain the current standards.
- The data obtained through interviews with nine Marines has illuminated potentially harmful practices Marines are engaging in to maintain height and weight standards, how these practices and the stressors associated with height and weight appear to be impacting the physical and emotional health of Marines, and how any of these factors might be impacting retention within the Marine Corps.

Marine Corps Body Composition Standards		
Age Group	Male	Female
17-20	18% BF	26% BF
21-25	18% BF	26% BF
26-30	19% BF	27% BF
31-35	19% BF	27% BF
36-40	20% BF	28% BF
41-45	20% BF	28% BF
46-50	21% BF	29% BF
51+	21% BF	29% BF

Maximum Body Fat Percentage Table by Age Group. Source: Headquarters, United States Marine Corps (2021).



Rank Distribution



Race Categories

Physical struggle	Responsible approach	Inaccurate standards	Zero impact on service
Eating disorders	Fear of not meeting standards	Doesn't equal fitness	Exit service
Starvation techniques	Personal pride	Define fitness	Factor
Health issues	Fear of taping	Overall health	Conflicting goals
Appearance	Stigma	Military Appearance program	Perceptions
Aging	Mental fatigue	Lack of accurate science	Failure
Dieting	Lifestyle change	Outdated	Anger
Tired	Stress	Never tools and science	Mental fixation
Fatigued	Inadequacy	250 PFI/CFI exemptions	Isolation
Excessive physical training	Embarrassment	Starting point	Depression
Fat vs. muscle	Uncertainty	Reflection of health	Self-conscious
Strength	Worth	Age	Jealousy
Sauna	Consequences	Fad diets	Heart health
Physical health	Body image issues	Education	Cotton mouth
Pain	Judgement	Nutrition	Excessive cardio
Dehydration	Mood changes	Fitness goals	Fear of failure
Supplements	Emotional health	Metabolism	Stress
Layering of clothing	Unworthy	Body Mass Index	Lack of confidence
Depletion	Brain fog	1st Class PFI/CFI	Expectations
Body aches	Frustration	Inaccurate methods	Metabolism
Degraded performance	Pain	Adverse material	Dizziness
Extreme weight loss	Apprehension	One size fits all	Blood pressure
Laxatives	Anxiety disorder	Unfair	Discipline
Induced vomiting	Nervousness	Society	Tanning
Exhaustion	Exposed	Bigger humans	Personal relationships
Hunger	Mental toughness	Additional weight	Adversity
Overtraining	Bullying	Neck size	Hornet's nest
Injuries	Shame	Metrics	Peer evaluation
Bodybuilding	Bitterness	Negative stigma	Intermediate fasting
Endurance athlete	Body dysmorphia	High level performer	Value
Accountability			

Codes

