

US military suicide rate at record high

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American troops are taking their own lives in the largest numbers since records began to be kept in 1980. In 2008, there were 128 confirmed suicides by serving army personnel and 41 by serving marines. Another 15 army deaths are still being investigated. The toll is another of the terrible consequences that have flowed from Washington's neo-colonial wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The army suicide rate is now higher than that among the general American population. The rate has been calculated as 20.2 per 100,000 soldiers, compared with 19.5 per 100,000 civilians. This is a shocking statistic, as soldiers theoretically are screened for mental illnesses before enlistment and have access to counselling and health services that millions of ordinary people cannot afford.

As there is an average of 10 failed suicide attempts for each actual loss of life, the figures suggest that more than 1,600 serving army and marine personnel tried to kill themselves last year.

Army Secretary Pete Geren told the Associated Press that "we cannot tell you" why the number of military suicides was rising. It is indisputable, however, that it is linked to the stresses on soldiers caused by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In 2002, the army suicide rate was just 9.8 per 100,000. The last time it exceeded the civilian rate was in the late 1960s, at the highpoint of the US war in Vietnam.

An estimated 30 percent of soldiers who took their own lives in 2008 did so while on deployment. Another 35 percent committed suicide after returning from a tour of duty. In one reported case, a highly regarded marine pilot hanged himself just one month before he

was scheduled to return to Iraq.

Dozens of men and women who have left the armed forces since serving in Afghanistan or Iraq also committed suicide in 2008. The Department of Veterans Affairs recorded 144 such cases. The suicide rate among veterans aged 20 to 24 was 22.9 per 100,000 in 2007—four times higher than non-veterans in the same age bracket. A hotline for veterans has received over 85,000 calls since mid-2007 and arranged some 2,100 suicide prevention interventions.

The rise in army suicides was registered despite an information campaign in the US military intended to end stigmas over seeking medical health for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and depression—psychological conditions that afflict tens of thousands of Afghanistan and Iraq veterans and in severe cases can trigger suicidal tendencies.

Veterans Affairs (VA) reported in January that 178,483 veterans of the two wars had been diagnosed with one or more mental illnesses between 2002 and September 2008. The conditions diagnosed included 92,998 cases of possible PTSD; 63,009 possible depressive disorders; 50,569 neurotic disorders; 35,937 cases of affective psychoses; 27,246 cases of drug abuse and 16,217 cases of alcohol dependency.

VA deputy director for mental health services, Antonette Zeiss, told the *Air Force Times*: "Most of these conditions would not have been present prior to being in the military. In VA, we assume that these are veterans coming to us who have had significant stresses as a result of their involvement with the military and the war."

The "significant stresses" would include killing;

repeated exposure to scenes of death and injury; the constant threat of death or injury; and the dehumanising policing operations that American soldiers have been ordered to conduct against civilian populations. No-one who has taken part in the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq could have returned completely unscathed by the experience.

The true extent of mental illness among war veterans is believed to be far worse than VA's figures. It has only treated around 400,000 of the 1.7 million men and women who have served. "We know there are guys who desperately need help who aren't coming to us," a spokesman told the *Air Force Times*. A Rand Corporation study last year estimated that 20 percent of Afghanistan and Iraq veterans—some 350,000 people—were suffering from PTSD.

As many as 18 veterans of American wars take their own lives in the United States every day—more than 6,500 per year. Vietnam veteran advocates have estimated that suicide ultimately killed more of the soldiers who fought in that conflict than the actual war itself. The same trend is now surfacing among the veterans of Afghanistan and Iraq.

A recent case was the suicide of Specialist Larry Applegate on January 16. After an argument with his wife, during which shots were fired, Applegate barricaded himself inside his Colorado Springs home. Shortly after, he killed himself with a bullet to the head.

The *Army Times* reported that the 27-year-old soldier, who served in Iraq during 2006, had been under the supervision of a Warrior Transition Unit (WTU) since February 2008 for an undisclosed condition. WTUs were established in June 2007 after the exposure of substandard treatment of wounded troops at the Walter Reed Medical Centre. There are currently some 9,000 soldiers assigned to 36 WTUs across the US.

A total of 68 soldiers had died under WTU care by October 2008. More than half the deaths were ruled to have resulted from natural causes, but nine were determined to be suicides. Six others were classified as accidental deaths caused by "combined lethal drug toxicity".



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