

Record number of US military and veteran suicides

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On average, a US military veteran commits suicide every 80 minutes, according to recent estimates from the Veterans Affairs (VA) Department. At the same time, suicides by active soldiers increased 15 percent in 2012, to a new record.

According to these figures, more soldiers and veterans take their own lives every year than have been killed in action throughout the last twelve years of Afghanistan and the last ten years of Iraq combined.

The figures on suicide numbers the VA uses are drawn from the National Violent Death Reporting System run by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention. Suicides among veterans account for about one-sixth of all suicides annually.

The department also reports that there are 950 suicide attempts per month among veterans being cared for by the Veterans Health Administration. About 150 of the attempts are successful, meaning that seven percent of military suicides occur while the veteran is being cared for by the VHA.

Thirty-three percent of recent veteran suicides are by those with a history of previous attempts.

These figures are far higher than the rate of active service member suicide, which is slightly less than one a day, amounting to 349 suicides of active duty personnel in 2012. This figure, however, is a new record. Recent data from the Army shows that soldiers deployed are more likely to commit suicide. This is a reversal from previous wars, in which those deployed were shown to be less likely to commit suicide.

The high suicide rates are a direct product of the neo-colonial wars being waged by US imperialism.

The Center for a New American Security reports the impact of military training on soldiers. It reports that “the very experience of being in the military and the violence and aggression that go along with it reduces

the fear of death inherent in human beings.”

This report also detailed drug and alcohol use among veterans. Approximately 14 percent of those in the Army take a prescribed opiate. Between 2005-2010, 29 percent of the Army suicides included drugs or alcohol.

An indicator of the impact of the most recent US wars on the suicide rate among veterans is the fact that former soldiers aged 17-24 are four times more likely than civilian youth to commit suicide.

The social conditions facing many veterans are another key component of the suicide rate. The VA reported that through the end of September 2012, 26,531 veterans were living on the street, at risk of losing their homes, staying in temporary housing or receiving federal vouchers to pay rent. This is more than double the number in 2010.

Moreover, 1.5 million veterans are at risk of homelessness. During the past year, only about 22,000 of these veterans were helped by the VA.

Young veterans are also more likely to be unemployed. Unpublished 2011 US Bureau of Labor Statistics data uncovered by the Center for American progress recorded that 30.2 percent of veterans age 18 to 24 were unemployed.

Poor social conditions have exacerbated the mental health conditions facing veterans. Since 2000, more than 936,000 veterans have been diagnosed with at least one mental health problem. The VA admits this number is likely much higher, with many veterans not seeking assistance dealing with the issues that arise from being deployed, particularly post-traumatic stress disorder. The VA’s suicide hotline receives on average 10,000 calls a month.

As many veterans face dismal job and housing prospects, they are unable to provide any medical treatment for themselves, relying solely on the VA.

This has swamped the agency as it attempts to cope with cases it receives even as its funding is being threatened. More than one million veterans await VA disability claims.

The callousness of the US ruling elite towards soldiers was evident in the recent US Supreme Court decision to refuse to hear a lawsuit that would force the VA to adequately care for those suffering from PTSD. (See, “US Supreme Court refuses to hear lawsuit on suicide crisis facing war veterans”).

In its pursuit of endless war abroad and one neocolonial invasion after the next, the American ruling class treats the majority of soldiers called on to carry out these operations as so much cannon fodder.



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