

# Congressional investigation opened into deaths of 27 soldiers this year at Fort Hood, Texas

Chase Lawrence  
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Over the last year, Fort Hood, in Killeen, Texas has been the scene of a string of murders, deaths, assaults, and other criminal behavior. The military newspaper *Stars and Stripes* has dubbed the base the Army's "most crime ridden post."

Army Secretary Ryan McCarthy stated in a visit to the base that it had the "highest, the most cases for sexual assault and harassment and murders for our entire formation of the US army." Just within the past year 27 soldiers have died either on the base or in Killeen, with five homicides, seven suicides, eight accidents, two deaths from disease, and five as-of-yet undetermined deaths. A 28th soldier from the base was killed in combat.

Democrat representatives Stephen Lynch (Massachusetts), who chairs the House Subcommittee on National Security, and Jackie Speier (California), who chairs the House Subcommittee on Military Personnel, sent a letter Tuesday to McCarthy requesting information and documents on the deaths and announcing a joint investigation by the subcommittees into the spate of deaths.

The letter cited Army data that documented an average of 129 felonies annually at Fort Hood between 2014 and 2019. These felonies include homicide, kidnapping, aggravated assault, sexual assault, and robbery. For a base which hosts many active military personnel deployed around the world, Fort Hood has seen more soldiers die at the base and in the city of Killeen than soldiers killed in combat since 2016.

Fort Hood was also the site of some of the most infamous deadly shootings on a military bases with 13 dead and 30 wounded by then Major Nidal Hasan in 2009, and another shooting in 2014 carried out by

Army Specialist Ivan Lopez who killed 4 and injured 14.

Representatives Lynch and Speier claimed that they would investigate and report on the reasons behind the murders and seek justice for the soldiers and families "who may have been failed by a military system and culture that was ultimately responsible for their care and protection."

An "independent command climate review" has been announced by McCarthy.

The investigation was prompted by protests over the murder of a female soldier, Specialist Vanessa Guillen, who was allegedly sexually harassed before her murder. Her family called for a congressional investigation because of the long delay in searching for her by the military. Her family also alleged that Guillen's fear of retribution prevented her from reporting the harassment to her superiors, a move that could have prevented her murderer from remaining in a position to kill her.

The leading causes of death at Fort Hood this year were accidents, followed by suicides, then murders. This only deviates slightly from the US military as a whole, where murders rank behind illness and injuries (which are distinct from accidents) as causes of death. Otherwise, the deaths on the base correspond to the military's casualties on bases in general.

A July 2020 report by the Congressional Research Service found that between 2006 and 2020, "a total of 17,645 active-duty personnel have died while serving in the U.S. Armed Forces." Of these deaths, 74 percent, or 13,068, are attributable to Non-Overseas Contingency Operations (Non-OCO), meaning on military bases outside of combat. Out of these, 93 percent happened in the United States, with the rest

happening in countries with bases such as Germany and Japan.

Accidents accounted for 39 percent of Non-OCO deaths, while self-inflicted deaths accounted for 30 percent and illness / injury accounting for 23 percent. Homicide accounts for 4 percent of Non-OCO deaths.

Of the murders at Fort Hood this year the victims were overwhelmingly soldiers drawn from working class areas and of low-rank.

On March 1, Specialist Shelby Tyler Jones, 20, was shot in Killeen outside of a strip club and later died of his wounds, with 15 people either witnessing or involved in the incident. Jones joined the Army in 2017 as a cavalry scout from the small town of Jena, Louisiana. According to US Census numbers, 20 percent of residents of the parish where Jena is located live in poverty. It is likely that Jones joined, as many others do, to escape poverty.

The *Army Times* reports that Jones was a member of the 3rd Cavalry Regiment, also called the Brave Rifles, and deployed to Iraq in Operation Inherent Resolve between May 2018 and January 2019. The 3rd Cavalry regiment commander said that Jones was a “dedicated professional who truly loved his family and the Army.”

Guillen, 20, was killed with a hammer in a base armory by a fellow soldier after having been continuously sexually harassed, reportedly by the suspect. The suspect shot himself after having been confronted by law enforcement. Guillen was born to immigrant parents and grew up in Houston, Texas. The poverty rate in Harris County stands at 1 out of every 5 people.

During the search for Guillen the body of another missing soldier, Private Gregory Morales, was found. Morales had been put down as a deserter at the time that he went missing in August 2019.

On May 18, Pfc Brandon Scott Rosecrans, 27, was shot and killed in his Jeep Wrangler by a civilian allegedly following a disagreement over a gun sale. Rosecran hailed from Kimberling City, Missouri, a town with around 2,300 people located in Stone County, Missouri. Rosecran joined the Army in May 2018 and had served as a quartermaster.

By and large, the military enlists working class people from impoverished areas who have few other options to make decent living or afford higher education after high school. The aforementioned are

representative of the rank-and-file. US Army infantry usually receive around \$20,000 in pay, not including benefits and housing. Despite the Pentagon’s massive budget, the rank-and-file of the US military is still afflicted by poverty, and with that comes social ills, suicide, homicide, and poor health.

Fort Hood, which is situated in Killeen, Texas, is one of the largest military bases in the country, housing 36,500 soldiers and another 30,000 family members. It is situated on 340 square miles of land and is home to an almost 200,000-acre training area and two airstrips. According to the US Army’s website, it is home to an extensive collection of military units that play and have played key roles in the last three decades of unending war with seven brigades, two divisions, a battalion, III Corps headquarters, a regiment, a garrison and medical center, and the US Army Operational Test Command.

The base also has around 500 tanks, 1,600 tracked vehicles, 10,000 wheeled vehicles, and 200 aircraft including AH-64 attack helicopters.

Many of the base’s brigades are deployed or have been deployed recently overseas in some capacity and have long histories of being used in US imperialism’s wars and occupations, with most recent being Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Hundreds of soldiers based at Fort Hood have been killed in these deployments.

This, combined with the poverty of the rank-and-file, the absolute indifference of the military to them, and the fostering of backwards and reactionary sentiments in the military, provides the necessary context in order to understand why the base, in fact the entire military, is beset by this wave of death.



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