

Suicide Claims More US Military Lives Than Afghan War

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American military personnel are continuing to take their own lives in unprecedented numbers, as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq wars drag on. By late November, at least 334 members of the armed forces had committed suicide in 2009, more than the 319 who were killed in Afghanistan or the 150 who died in Iraq. While a final figure is not available, the toll of military suicides last year was the worst since records began to be kept in 1980.

The Army, National Guard and Army Reserve lost at least 211 personnel to suicide. More than half of those who took their lives had served in either Iraq or Afghanistan. The Army suicide rate of 20.2 per 100,000 personnel is higher than that registered among males aged 19 to 29, the gender age bracket with the highest rate among the general population. Before 2001, the Army rarely suffered 10 suicides per 100,000 soldiers.

The Navy lost at least 47 active duty personnel in 2009, the Air Force 34 and the Marine Corp, which has been flung into some of the bloodiest fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, 42. The Marine suicide rate has soared since 2001 from 12 to at least 19.5 per 100,000.

For every death, at least five members of the armed forces were hospitalised for attempting to take their life. According to the Navy Times, 2 percent of Army; 2.3 percent of Marines and 3 percent of Navy respondents to the military's own survey of 28,536 members from all branches reported they had attempted suicide at some point. The "Defense Survey of Health-Related Behaviors" also found "dangerous levels" of alcohol abuse and the illicit use of drugs such as pain killers by 12 percent of personnel.

The trigger for a suicide attempt varied from case to case: relationship breakdowns, financial problems, substance abuse, tensions with other members of their unit, a traumatic event. What is clear, however, is that military service has seriously impacted on the physical and mental health of the victims.

The suicide figures for serving personnel are only one indication. The most alarming statistics are those on mental illness related to the hundreds of thousands of veterans of the two wars who have left the military and sought to reintegrate into civilian life.

While there is no exact figure, studies estimate that as many as 20 to 30 percent of veterans suffer some degree of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), hindering their ability to hold down jobs, maintain relationships, overcome substance abuse and, in some cases, maintain their will to live. The worsening economic conditions facing working people in the US are aggravating the difficulties.

A survey last year found that at least 15 percent of former soldiers in the 20 to 24 age bracket were unemployed. An article by the Florida Today site on January 3 reported that 450 of the 800 homeless in Brevard County were Iraq or Afghanistan veterans. Shelters in California are reporting twice as many requests for assistance from new veterans compared with 2007. At the current rate, they will eventually outnumber the more than 100,000 homeless Vietnam vets.

A study of veterans with PTSD published last August by the Journal of Traumatic Stress found that 47 percent had had suicidal thoughts before seeking treatment and 3 percent had attempted to kill themselves. The US Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) has been compelled to substantially upgrade its services. Since its 24-hour, seven-days a week suicide hotline was belatedly established in July 2007, it has counselled over 185,000 veterans or their families and claims to have prevented at least 5,000 suicides. It now has 400 counselors dedicated to suicide prevention though even the Pentagon admits far more are needed.

People who served in either Iraq or Afghanistan make up a growing proportion of the 6,400 veterans that VA estimates take their own lives each year. A 2007 CBS study put the rate among male veterans aged 20 to 24 at four times the national average—more than 40 per 100,000 per year.

The suicide estimates do not include the hundreds of young veterans who die each year in auto accidents, many of which are linked with excessive speed or driving under the influence and kill or injure others as well. In 2008, veterans who served in Iraq or Afghanistan were 75 percent more likely to die in an auto accident than non-veterans and 148 percent more likely to die in a motorcycle crash. Suicide statistics also do not count deaths that are classified as accidental drug-related overdoses.

American society will continue to pay for the harm caused by the Iraq and Afghan wars for decades to come. There is a growing medical consensus that a significant factor in PTSD is actual physical damage to the brain. Developments in vehicle and body armour, combined with advances in medical treatment, have enabled thousands of soldiers to survive bomb blasts that might have taken their lives in earlier conflicts. They survive with trauma to their brain however.

The Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury estimated in early 2009 that between 45,000 to 90,000 veterans of the two wars had been left with “severe and lasting symptoms” of brain injury. Overall, the Defense Department estimates that as many as 20 percent of veterans had suffered some degree of brain injury due to bomb blasts while in Iraq or Afghanistan—a staggering 360,000 men and women.

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