

Suicide crisis mounts for US soldiers and veterans

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Conditions facing active military service members and veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan amount to nothing less than a social crisis. According to a report obtained from the Pentagon by the Associated Press, more American armed forces active service members have killed themselves in the first six months of 2012 than in the first six months of any of the previous 11 years.

The devastating report reveals that a total of 154 soldiers killed themselves in the first 155 days of 2012. The number of deaths by suicide is 50 percent higher than combat deaths in Afghanistan during the same period and represents an 18 percent increase over active service member suicides in the first six months of 2011.

Since the war in Afghanistan began in 2001, there has been an average of one suicide every 36 hours in the US armed forces. In 2011, 19.5 percent of all active duty deaths were suicides—the second highest cause of death. From 2005 to 2009 alone, over 1,100 soldiers killed themselves.

These disturbing statistics expose the inhumane hypocrisy of the American ruling class and their political representatives who have fanned the flames of war in Afghanistan and Iraq. To the ruling elite, soldiers are nothing more than disposable tools that deserve no attention when they return in shambles from the battlefield.

US Army Maj. General Dana Pittard spoke for a layer of the ruling class when he stated in January, 2012: “I have now come to the conclusion that suicide is an absolutely selfish act... I am personally fed up with soldiers who are choosing to take their own lives so that others can clean up their mess. Be an adult, act like an adult, and deal with your real-life problems like the rest of us.”

Pittard has subsequently backtracked on his statement, but has refused to apologize.

The depth of the misery and trauma that veterans face upon their return adds a deeper layer to the crisis. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, 18 veterans kill themselves each day. This astonishing number amounts to one suicide every 80 minutes. The Army Times also reported that in fiscal year 2009, 1,868 veterans attempted suicide.

As Nick Kristat of the New York Times recently pointed out, veteran suicide statistics show that for every soldier that dies in combat, 25 more kill themselves. The Veterans Administration (VA) claims that its 24-hour suicide hotline has received over 400,000 phone calls since its founding in 2007.

A report by the Chronicle of Higher Education contends that half of veterans in college have

contemplated suicide, while 20 percent have made plans to do so. Nearly half showed symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), while a third suffer from severe anxiety and a fourth from severe depression.

Additionally, a total of 936,000 soldiers have been diagnosed with at least one mental issue since 2000, and veterans aged 17-24 are almost four times as likely as non-veterans of their age group to kill themselves.

Other reports have attempted to shed light on the reasons behind these numbers. The Center for a New American Security issued a policy brief earlier this year in which it lists important issues such as hazing, prescription drug addiction, cultural stigma, and lack of care providers as main factors behind active service member suicides.

Dr. David Rudd, the co-founder of the National Center of Veterans Studies at the University of Utah, explains that PTSD, combat exposure, and drug addiction are the leading factors behind military suicides.

These organizations and others like them—which claim that adding military psychologists or increasing funding to suicide prevention programs will effectively deal with the soldier and veteran suicide crisis—are shortsighted at best. They fail to recognize the economic hardship that veterans face when returning home. For example, the VA reports that 76,000 veterans are homeless each night and that the unemployment rate for veterans is significantly higher than for the general population.

Most importantly, however, these groups fail to note that the only real way to prevent military suicide is the prevention of war in the first place. Generation after generation of American working class youth have been either forced into the military or encouraged to volunteer because of the many economic and social pressures placed on young people in US society.

While many soldiers are sent to their deaths on behalf of the American capitalist class, it is particularly revealing that even those who are fortunate enough to return from combat must continue to fight at home for their physical and mental well-being. In an increasing number of cases, the weight is too much to bear.

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