

The Washington Post

Army Suicides Highest in 26 Years

By PAULINE JELINEK

The Associated Press

Thursday, August 16, 2007; 2:54 AM

WASHINGTON -- Army soldiers committed suicide last year at the highest rate in 26 years, and more than a quarter did so while serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, according to a new military report.

The report, obtained by The Associated Press ahead of its scheduled release Thursday, found there were 99 confirmed suicides among active duty soldiers during 2006, up from 88 the previous year and the highest number since the 102 suicides in 1991 at the time of the Persian Gulf War.

The suicide rate for the Army has fluctuated over the past 26 years, from last year's high of 17.3 per 100,000 to a low of 9.1 per 100,000 in 2001.

Last year, "Iraq was the most common deployment location for both (suicides) and attempts," the report said.

The 99 suicides included 28 soldiers deployed to the two wars and 71 who weren't. About twice as many women serving in Iraq and Afghanistan committed suicide as did women not sent to war, the report said.

Preliminary numbers for the first half of this year indicate the number of suicides could decline across the service in 2007 but increase among troops serving in the wars, officials said.

The increases for 2006 came as Army officials worked to set up a number of new and stronger programs for providing mental health care to a force strained by the longer-than-expected war in Iraq and the global counterterrorism war entering its sixth year.

Failed personal relationships, legal and financial problems and the stress of their jobs were factors motivating the soldiers to commit suicide, according to the report.

"In addition, there was a significant relationship between suicide attempts and number of days deployed" in Iraq, Afghanistan or nearby countries where troops are participating in the war effort, it said. The same pattern seemed to hold true for those who not only attempted, but succeeded in killing themselves.

There also "was limited evidence to support the view that multiple ... deployments are a risk factor for suicide behaviors," it said.

About a quarter of those who killed themselves had a history of at least one psychiatric disorder. Of those, about 20 percent had been diagnosed with a mood disorder such as bipolar disorder and/or depression; and 8 percent had been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, including post traumatic stress disorder _ one of the signature injuries of the conflict in Iraq.

Firearms were the most common method of suicide. Those who attempted suicide but didn't succeed tended more often to take overdoses and cut themselves.

In a service of more than a half million troops, the 99 suicides amounted to a rate of 17.3 per 100,000 _ the highest in the past 26 years, the report said. The average rate over those years has been 12.3 per 100,000.

The rate for those serving in the wars stayed about the same, 19.4 per 100,000 in 2006, compared with 19.9

in 2005.

The Army said the information was compiled from reports collected as part of its suicide prevention program _ reports required for all "suicide-related behaviors that result in death, hospitalization or evacuation" of the soldier. It can take considerable time to investigate a suicide and, in fact, the Army said that in addition to the 99 confirmed suicides last year, there are two other deaths suspected as suicides in which investigations were pending.

Associated Press reporter Lolita C. Baldor contributed to this report from Washington.

On the Net:

Defense Department: <http://www.defenselink.mil>

© 2007 The Associated Press