

Suicide Rate for Female U.S. Military Veterans Six Times Higher than Others



Washington, June 24 (RHC)-- Female military veterans in the United States commit suicide at nearly six times the rate of other women in the country, with suicide rates highest among young veterans, new government research shows. Their suicide rate is so high that it approaches that of male veterans, a finding that surprised researchers because men generally are far more likely than women to commit suicide.

For women, ages 18 to 29, veterans kill themselves at nearly 12 times the rate of non-veterans, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has found in new research using 11 years of data. In every other age group, including women who served as far back as the 1950s in the Korean War, the veteran suicide rates are between four and eight times higher.

The data, used for the VA study, include all 173,969 adult suicides committed by men and women, veterans and nonveterans, in 23 US states between 2000 and 2010. "It's staggering," said Dr. Matthew Miller, an epidemiologist and suicide expert at Northeastern University, who was not involved in the research. "We have to come to grips with why the rates are so obscenely high."

Male veterans kill themselves less than twice the rate of men in the general population. Among men, 18 to 29 years old, it is nearly five times the rate of other males. Though suicide has become a major issue for the U.S. military over the last decade, little has been known about female veteran suicide because most research has focused on men.

"We've been missing something that now we can see," said Michael Schoenbaum, an epidemiologist and military suicide researcher at the National Institute of Mental Health who was not part of the work. Women attempt suicide more often than men in the general population, but succeed less because women usually use pills or other methods that are less lethal than guns.

However, female veterans are more likely than other women to have guns, government surveys have shown. In the new study, VA researchers found that 40 percent of the female veterans who committed suicide used firearms, compared with 34 percent of other women.

Overall, 40,571 men and 2,637 women, identified as former military personnel, killed themselves over the 11 years in the data. Researchers say various factors play a role in the astonishingly high rate of suicides, including sexual and emotional abuse during military service.

The U.S. Defense Department has estimated that 10 percent of women in the military have been raped while serving and another 13 percent experienced unwanted sexual contact, a deep-rooted problem that has gained attention in recent years as more victims come forward.

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