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## Is the U.S. Army Losing Its War on Suicide?

By Mark Thompson / Washington

From the invasion of Afghanistan until last summer, the U.S. military had lost 761 soldiers in combat there. But a higher number in the service — 817 — had taken their own lives over the same period. The surge in suicides, which have risen five years in a row, has become a vexing problem for which the Army's highest levels of command have yet to find a solution despite deploying hundreds of mental-health experts and investing millions of dollars. And the elephant in the room in much of the formal discussion of the problem is the burden of repeated tours of combat duty on a soldier's battered psyche.

The problem is exacerbated by the manpower challenges faced by the service, because new research suggests that repeated combat deployments seem to be driving the suicide surge. The only way to apply the brakes will be to reduce the number of deployments per soldier and extend what the Army calls "dwell time" — the duration spent at home between trips to war zones. But the only way to make that possible would be to expand the Army's troop strength, or reduce the number of soldiers sent off to war. [See pictures of an Army town's struggle with PTSD.](#)

"It's frankly frustrating that with the level of effort that we've put out there, that we haven't stemmed the [suicide] tide," General George Casey, the Army's top officer, told a House panel March 23. When pressed by a lawmaker the previous month on whether the Army was getting closer to solving the challenge, Army Secretary John McHugh was blunt. "Sadly, the answer is not much closer," he told the Senate Armed Services Committee Feb. 23. "As to why people take this step — particularly as to why men and women in uniform do — we're still in many ways befuddled."

*Befuddled* and *frustrating* are not words routinely deployed by Army leaders. But the service's suicide rate continues to rise (it doubled between 2001 and 2006) while remaining flat in the civilian population, even when adjusted to reflect the Army's age and gender. Last year, 160 active-duty soldiers killed themselves, up from 140 in 2008 and 77 in 2003. In order to get a better grip on the causes of the problem, the service has issued new orders telling its commanders how to conduct future suicide investigations so that they are consistent across the board, spokesman Gary Tallman says. The directive's stated goal is to pinpoint "the circumstances, methods and contributing factors surrounding the event" in hopes of generating "clear, relevant and practical recommendation(s) to prevent future suicides." The Army wants to know all about the dead soldier's personal relationships, final conversation, financial status, recent moods and other personality traits.

When accounting publicly for the trend, Army commanders tend to avoid acknowledging that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq may be a cause. "A third of the confirmed suicides are committed by troops that had never deployed," McHugh recently told a House panel. But the other two-thirds killed themselves either in a war zone or after returning from one. "The suicide rate among soldiers who have deployed to [war zones] is higher than for soldiers who have never deployed," Colonel Elspeth Ritchie, a top Army psychiatrist, told a suicide-prevention conference in January. [\(Comment on this story.\)](#)

Army leaders say that broken personal relationships seem to be the most common thread linking suicides. "The one transcendent factor that we seem to have, if there's any one that's associated with [suicide], is fractured relationships of some sort," Lieut. General Eric Schoemaker, the Army surgeon general, told a Senate panel last month. What they fail to note, however, is the corrosive effect repeated deployments can have on such relationships. Ritchie pointed out in January that there are "higher rates of mental-health problems and marital problems for multiple deployers." [\(Watch TIME's video "The Soldier's Experience: Iraq vs. Afghanistan."\)](#)

In recent years, soldiers had been allowed only a year of dwell time before heading back to war. Even though dwell time is now getting closer to two years, research suggests it takes up to three years for the stress of a one-year combat deployment to abate.

The experience of combat itself may also play a role. "Combat increases fearlessness about death and the capability for suicide," said Craig Bryan, a University of Texas psychologist, briefing Pentagon officials in January. The combination of combat exposure and ready access to guns can be lethal to anyone contemplating suicide. About half of soldiers who kill themselves use weapons, and the figure rises to 93% among those deployed in war zones.

Bryan, a suicide expert who recently left the Air Force, says the military finds itself in a catch-22. "We train our warriors to use controlled violence and aggression, to suppress strong emotional reactions in the face of adversity, to tolerate physical and emotional pain and to overcome the fear of injury and death," he told TIME. While required for combat, "these qualities are also associated with increased risk for suicide." Such conditioning cannot be dulled "without negatively affecting the fighting capability of our military," he adds. "Service members are, simply put, more capable of killing themselves by sheer consequence of their professional training." [\(See pictures about suicide in Army recruiters' ranks.\)](#)

Bryan's research suggests that the Army's most effective suicide-prevention strategy would be to make its troops suicide-resistant rather than trying to intervene once soldiers have decided to kill themselves. The Army seems to be listening. Its goal is more aimed at "holistically improving the physical, mental and spiritual health of our soldiers and their families than solely focusing on suicide prevention," says General Peter Chiarelli, the service's No. 2 officer and its key suicide fighter. "If we do the first, we are convinced that the second will happen." His boss concurs. For too long, General Casey told a Senate panel March 3, "we were shooting behind the target," trying to prevent suicide when it was already too late.

[\(Read "A Mounting Suicide Rate Prompts an Army Response."\)](#)

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