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Pentagon Report Places Blame for Suicides

By **ELISABETH BUMILLER**

WASHINGTON — At a time of record-high military suicides, commanders are ignoring the mental health problems of American soldiers and not winnowing out enough of those with records of substance abuse and crime, a [United States Army](#) report has concluded.

The report, released Thursday at the Pentagon, found that it was not only the stress of repeated deployments over nearly a decade in Iraq and Afghanistan that has driven the [Army](#) suicide rate above the civilian rate for the first time since the Vietnam War. Significantly, the report said that 79 percent of the soldiers who committed suicide had had only one deployment, or had not deployed at all.

“For us to blame this thing just on the war would be wrong,” Gen. Peter W. Chiarelli, the vice chief of staff of the Army, said at a news conference about the report. “That’s not what we’re trying to do here.”

Nonetheless, General Chiarelli said that he believed — but could not prove statistically — that the overall Army suicide rate had been driven up by the 21 percent of suicides committed by soldiers with multiple deployments. “That has just always been my concern, that they may be it, that may be the reason,” he said. “But I don’t have any data that I can tie that to.”

There were a record 160 active-duty Army suicides in the year from Oct. 1, 2008, to Sept. 30, 2009.

The report said that if the Army added in accidental deaths, which it said are often the result of high-risk behavior involving drinking and drugs, “less young men and women die in combat than die by their own actions.” It concluded: “We are often more dangerous to ourselves than the enemy.”

According to the Army, roughly 20 out of 100,000 soldiers have killed themselves, compared with a rate of roughly 19 out of 100,000 for the civilian population.

The report put a large part of the blame on commanders who either failed to recognize or disregarded high-risk behavior among their troops. “There are instances where a leader’s lack of soldier accountability resulted in suicide victims not being found until they had been dead for three or four weeks,” the report said.

In addition, the report said that the pace of constant deployments in two wars had forced a lowering of recruiting and retention standards. Many new recruits were granted waivers, it said, for behavior that would have kept them out of the service in earlier years. Of 80,403 waivers granted since 2004, the report found that 47,478 were granted to people with a history of drug or alcohol abuse, misdemeanor crime or

“serious misconduct,” which it defined as felony.

At the same time, the report found that there was a decrease in soldiers forced to leave the Army for misconduct. “This has likely resulted in the retention of over 25,283 soldiers who would have otherwise been separated in previous years,” the report said.

General Chiarelli said that the majority of Army suicides — 60 percent — are committed during a soldier’s first enlistment, typically four years, and that the most dangerous year is the first. “We see more suicides in that first year than any other year,” General Chiarelli said.

Most new recruits are 18 to 20 years old, a statistically high-risk group for suicide because of their age. But General Chiarelli said the suicide rate for soldiers who first entered the Army in their late 20s was three times higher than for those in the younger group.

General Chiarelli said he did not want to typecast, “but I think it’s fair to say in some instances it would be a soldier that’s possibly married, couple of kids, lost his job, no health care insurance, possibly a single parent.” Such a soldier, General Chiarelli said, “is coming in the Army to start all over again, and we see this high rate of suicide.”

Among the solutions, some of which have already been put in place, the report recommended tightened enlistment standards, expanded mental health screening, a confidential alcohol treatment program and better coordination between primary care physicians and mental health counselors.

Over all, General Chiarelli said, “The United States Army is a fully capable force comprised of 1.1 million men and women,” and “we are in fact expending much, much effort on a very, very small portion of this population.”