

Suicide rates soar among US veterans: official

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WASHINGTON — The economic downturn and the trauma of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have pushed more US veterans to suicide, Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki said Thursday.

As Americans across the United States and around the world celebrated the contributions of men and women in uniform on Veterans Day, Shinseki outlined a sobering picture for the approximately 23 million veterans in the United States.

Only eight million of those veterans are currently registered with the Department of Veterans Affairs, Shinseki said. Many slip through the cracks due to crippling mental health problems, homelessness, alcohol and illegal drug abuse or crime.

Several studies have shown that suicides are on the rise among youths who have left the military.

"It's compounded by the stress, the trauma that goes with the current operations, where we have a much smaller military being asked to do so much and then repeat it tour after tour," Shinseki told National Public Radio (NPR).

"I know the suicide numbers are up."

In January, he indicated that 20 percent of some 30,000 suicides in the United States each year are committed by veterans. That means that an average of 18 veterans commit suicide each year.

Suicides claimed the lives of a record 309 servicemembers last year, up from 267 in 2008, according to Pentagon numbers. The number of suicides between 2005 and 2009 -- 1,100 -- exceeded that of the number of US military members killed in Afghanistan since 2001.

The Pentagon and the Department of Veterans Affairs do not keep statistics on veteran deaths.

Shinseki pointed to a backlog of Veterans Affairs cases or disability claims that has soared to over 700,000 this year, up from 400,000 to 500,000 the year before.

He noted that the number of new cases has increased faster than his agency's capacity. Even though the Department of Veterans Affairs closed out 977,000 cases last year, it got another million new cases.

A large number of the new cases involve younger veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The Department of Veterans Affairs has changed its requirements regarding PTSD claims, so that veterans no longer have to prove they got the disorder because they served in a warzone. There has also long been a stigma in the military associated with psychological problems.

"If it's verified, that connection is now automatic, it's provided," Shinseki explained, noting this had increased the number of cases he has to address.

"We have PTSD treatment going on with veterans that go back to World War II, Korea, Vietnam. So it's a large generational issue."

Asked whether the dour economy had increased veterans' reliance on his agency, Shinseki noted that "the economic downturn has had that impact on families" over the past year and half, while he has struggled to meet a goal to end homelessness among veterans in five years.

"We're doing fine, just not going fast enough," he added.

A July report by the army on suicide prevention found that senior leaders have failed to track reckless behavior and monitor alcohol and drug abuse among soldiers back home as the military focused on fighting the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan over nearly a decade.

Repeated deployments with shortened dwell time have also strained the military, and the army hopes to soon give soldiers two years at home for every year deployed.

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