

Department of Defense Quarterly Suicide Report Calendar Year 2016 2nd Quarter Defense Suicide Prevention Office (DSPO)

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**DEFENSE SUICIDE
PREVENTION OFFICE**

Department of Defense Quarterly Suicide Report Calendar Year 2016 Second Quarter

Introduction

The Department of Defense (DoD) Suicide Prevention Office (DSPO) integrates a holistic approach to suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention utilizing a range of medical and non-medical resources. DSPO is taking a responsible, measurable, and deliberative approach in its efforts to combat death by suicide through data surveillance and analysis; research and program evaluation; advocacy; plans and policy oversight; outreach; and training oversight. It is through these efforts that we will build a steady and resilient force that encompasses Service members, civilians, and their families.

DSPO is committed to fostering collaboration and cooperation to develop suicide prevention efforts among all stakeholders, including the Military Departments; federal agencies; public, private, and non-profit organizations; international entities; and institutions of higher education.

DSPO partners with other leading organizations (i.e., Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Institute of

Mental Health, United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)) and leverages the existing knowledge and expertise in suicide prevention to support a “whole-of-life” approach and apply it to the specifics of the military: aspects of a person, a community, military life, the unit, or an environment that will make death by suicide¹ more likely (risk factors) or less likely (protective factors).

DSPO develops the Quarterly Suicide Report (QSR) to collect and report objective and consistent quantitative data to share with appropriate stakeholders. The QSR is the DoD-level quarterly publication, which

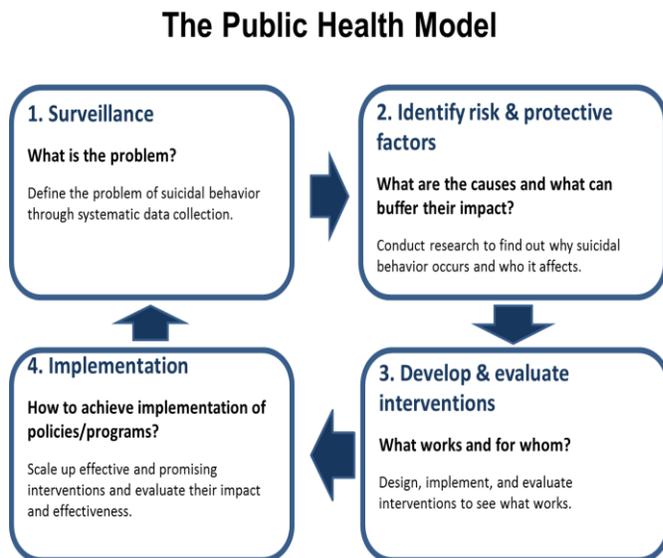


Figure 1: World Health Organization Public Health Model

¹The term “suicide” is defined as “Death caused by self-directed injurious behavior with an intent to die as a result of the behavior” (Reference: CDC-<http://www.cdc.gov/violencePrevention/suicide/definitions.html>)

provides the most up-to-date suicide data for the Active Component² (Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force) and the Reserve Component (Reserve, National Guard).³ DSPO partners with the Office of the Armed Forces Medical Examiner System (AFMES),⁴ which provides worldwide comprehensive medico-legal services and investigations, and the Services to develop and distribute the QSR. The QSR is accurate, clear, timely, and inclusive:

- **Accurate:** Historical counts are revised as the underlying data are updated (deaths by suicide are confirmed or new cases are reported) so the current QSR can be considered the best “on time” data source for suicide in the DoD. In addition, the Services verify the duty status of all deaths by suicide in the QSR.
- **Clear:** Information is self-contained, transparent, and concise. It is not advisable to compare QSR data to other publications as different reporting and confirmation mechanisms might apply.
- **Timely:** Data are published within 90 days of the end of every quarter. There is no other public DoD report with more timely information on deaths by suicide.
- **Inclusive:** All the Services and the Reserve Component are included in the report.

Data surveillance is used to demonstrate the scope of military suicide, determine distribution trends and patterns, monitor changes, generate hypotheses, and stimulate research efforts. The QSR does not include the means (e.g., medication, firearms) used in suicide death, but the quantitative data provided inform the development of public health approaches to suicide prevention.

DSPO’s data surveillance is based on a collaborative effort with the Services and AFMES. These efforts promote strategic alignment and integration of suicide prevention into military, civilian, and family policies and programs.

The QSR Data

The QSR provides the number of deaths by suicide. Over time, these numbers can provide insight into patterns and trends and be indicative of underlying protective or risk factors that either mitigate or increase the likelihood of suicide. The primary data surveillance function of the QSR is to identify how many individuals die by suicide, and within which DoD Service and Component, however we understand that suicide is complex, and must be approached in a

² Active Component: Full-time members of the U.S. Armed Forces and Cadets/Midshipmen at the designated military academies.

³ Reserve Component: Reserve Component personnel in this report are members of the Selected Reserves (SELRES). SELRES are drilling and training members of the National Guard and Reserves, Individual Mobilization Augmentees, and full-time support Active Guard and Reservists, regardless of duty status at time of death. The report excludes the Individual Ready Reserve (IRR) and Inactive National Guard (ING), military retirees and members in Temporary or Permanent Disability Retired Lists (TDRL, PDRL), to avoid double-counting Department of Veterans Affairs data.

⁴ AFMES may conduct a forensic pathology investigation to determine the cause or manner of death of a deceased person if such an investigation is determined to be justified under circumstances...” such as...it appears that the decedent was killed or that, whatever the cause of the decedent’s death, the cause was unnatural...or the cause or manner of death is unknown...” (10 USC 1471)

holistic manner. The complexity of suicide prevention entails risk and protective factors spanning the fields of medicine, epidemiology, sociology, psychology, criminology, education, law, military, and economics. Data surveillance outcomes help generate hypotheses that target research efforts. Thus, the power of the QSR data resides in the accuracy and timeliness of those data. Continued tracking and analysis will promote in-depth research for more effective implementation of suicide prevention efforts.

In the second quarter of 2016, the military services reported the following:

- 57 deaths by suicide in the Active Component
- 23 deaths by suicide in the Reserves
- 23 deaths by suicide in the National Guard

Please refer to Appendix A for a detailed breakdown of the number of deaths by suicide within each Service and Component.

Patterns and Trends

This QSR indicates differences in the total number of deaths by suicide across the Services and Components. This difference is largely due to the total population of each Service and Component. For instance, the Army has the largest population and, correspondingly, has the largest number of total deaths by suicide. However, there may also be other Service or Component-specific risk factors that could influence the number of deaths by suicide. Examples of two potential risk factors are deployment and combat exposure, which have been a subject of military suicide research over the last year.

Research suggests that there may not be a direct association between suicide and deployment.⁵ However, deployment does represent a time of transition that can disrupt social and interpersonal structure and relationships. There is likely an interplay of feelings of belongingness, connectedness, and acquired capability (the concept that repeated exposure to painful or fearsome experiences results in a higher tolerance for pain) that is influenced by deployment transitions. Research on civilian suicide has shown that transitions such as these can be a risk factor for suicide.^{6 7}

The interplay between belongingness, connectedness, and acquired capability may also influence the impact of combat exposure on the risk of dying by suicide.^{8 9 10} For instance, research shows

⁵ Reger et al. (2015). *Risk of Suicide Among US Military Service Members Following Operation Enduring Freedom or Operation Iraqi Freedom Deployment and Separation From the US Military*, *JAMA Psychiatry*, 72(6):561-9.

⁶ Van Orden et al. (2010). *The Interpersonal Theory of Suicide*. *Psychology Rev.*, 117(2): 575–600.

⁷ Ursano et al. (2016). *Risk Factors, Methods, and Timing of Suicide Attempts Among US Army Soldiers*. *JAMA Psychiatry*, 73(7).

⁸ Brenner L. & Barnes (2012). *Facilitating Treatment Engagement During High-Risk Transition Periods: A Potential Suicide Prevention Strategy*. *American Journal of Public Health*, 102, Supplement 1:S12-4.

⁹ Nock et al. (2013). *Suicide Among Soldiers: A Review of Psychosocial Risk and Protective Factors*. *Psychiatry*, 76(2): 97–125.

¹⁰ Wolf-Clark & Bryan C. (2016). *Integrating Two Theoretical Models to Understand and Prevent Military and Veteran Suicide*. *Armed Forces and Society*.

that community support and connectedness while in-theater can be a protective factor, and there may be differences between Services and Components that influence that level of support. Recent research has also suggested that certain types of combat exposure may be associated with a greater sense of acquired capability.^{11 12} These factors may contribute to differences in the number of deaths by suicide across Services and Components. Further research is necessary to better understand the interplay of risk factors, and to develop unit-level and community support and training interventions that increase the protective aspects of military culture.

Everyone Plays a Positive Role in Suicide Prevention

Communities, peers, close individuals, and the media are critical in preventing death by suicide. If you are concerned about a friend or loved one:

- **Be direct.** Talk openly and matter-of-factly about suicide.
- **Be willing to listen.** Allow expressions of feelings. Accept the feelings.
- **Be non-judgmental.** Don't debate whether suicide is right or wrong, or whether feelings are good or bad. Don't lecture about the value of life.
- **Get involved.** Become available. Show interest and support.
- **Don't dare** him/her to do it.
- **Don't act shocked.** This will put distance between you.
- **Don't be sworn to secrecy.** Seek help.
- **Offer hope** that alternatives are available, but do not offer general reassurances such as, "it will get better" or "it could be worse."
- **Get help** from persons or agencies specializing in crisis intervention and suicide prevention, such as Military Crisis Line.

“Communities play a critical role in suicide prevention. They can provide social support to vulnerable individuals and engage in follow-up care, fight stigma and support those bereaved by suicide.”

*World Health Organization, 2014
Preventing Suicide: A Global Imperative*

Research shows that the way the media portrays suicide can either increase the risk of dying by suicide in vulnerable individuals, or can encourage those at risk to seek help. To ensure a positive impact when reporting, please follow these recommendations:

- Inform your audience of the issue without sensational headlines or claims.

¹¹ Bryan et al. (2010). *Combat experience and the acquired capability for suicide. Journal of Clinical Psychology, 66(10), 1044-1056.*

¹² Blossnich & Bosarte, R. (2013). *Suicide acceptability among U.S. Veterans with active duty experience: Results from the 2010 General Social Survey. Archives of Suicide Research. 17(1), 52-57.*

- Be careful not to describe death by suicide numbers as an “epidemic” or “skyrocketing.” More investigation is always required to understand patterns and trends in data surveillance.
- Help your audience understand that suicide is a public health issue, not a crime.
- Provide your audience with the understanding that suicide is preventable, and that community connectedness is an important part of suicide prevention.
- Include crisis hotline contact information and other resources that provide help.

Access to Lethal Means for Suicide

Research shows suicidal thoughts and behaviors are fluid. Putting distance between a person who is having thoughts of suicide and lethal means, such as a gun or prescription drugs, can help save their life. Family and friends can take steps to ensure that lethal means are stored safely and securely, especially during times of crisis.

- ***Recognize if someone may be suicidal.*** Look for warning signs such as someone talking about being better off dead.
- ***Make sure your gun is secure inside your home.*** Store the gun unloaded in a secured and locked location, different from where the ammunition is stored. Consider using a gun lock or removing the firing pin.
- ***Explore options to temporarily store guns outside of your home.*** In times of crisis, consider storing weapons at a family member, friend, or neighbor’s house in a locked box, at the local armory, or at the local police department, until the person no longer feels suicidal. Please note that some local and state laws require weapon registration for legal storage; always follow the law in your jurisdiction.

Outreach

Suicide Prevention Month (SPM) 2016: The DoD and VA, in an effort to raise public awareness of suicide risk among Service members and Veterans, once again participated in SPM. The SPM 2016 national outreach efforts focused on ensuring Service members, Veterans, their families and friends, and their support networks understand that there are suicide prevention and mental/behavioral health resources available. SPM also allowed DoD and VA to demonstrate how individuals, organizations, and communities can work together to support Service members and Veterans during times of crisis and provide life-saving resources for those at risk of death by suicide.

Throughout the entire month, online and in-person channels were available to provide information about the DoD and VA suicide prevention and mental health resources while emphasizing the important role that everyone plays in suicide prevention. The DoD and VA collaborated with service branches, community groups, Veterans Service Organizations, and Military Service Organizations, non-profit organizations, health care providers, corporations, educational institutions, government agencies, and others.

SPM served as the kickoff for a yearlong DoD campaign scheduled through August 2017. The message being promoted throughout the year is:

- Emphasize that everyday connections can make a big difference to someone feeling alone or hopeless.

- Remind people that they don't need special training to safely talk about suicide risk or show genuine concern for someone in crisis.
- Encourage people to reach out to others by calling, reconnecting, meeting for coffee, or going for a walk together. They can be there for Service members and Veterans.
- Encourage people to help themselves if they're feeling lonely or in need by calling a friend or family member, or seeking help from a community resource.
- Educate Service members and Veterans about suicide prevention and mental health resources.
- Inspire communities to be there for Service members and Veterans in their networks and local areas.

Conclusion

Suicide continues to be a significant public health issue nationally and in the military. Suicide is a complex problem that requires a public health approach and data surveillance is key to these efforts. Over time, tracking data will uncover existing patterns and reveal trends that will help better understand and prevent deaths by suicide. The DoD will use the knowledge gained over time to develop and promote research-informed suicide prevention policies, practices and programs to most effectively address the specific factors attributed to military suicide. Additionally, DSPO will employ an inclusive approach, by deepening existing relationships and cultivating new ones with relevant stakeholders, to contribute to ongoing education and outreach about military suicide prevention.

Attachment A

DoD Service and Component	CY2012	CY2013					CY2014					CY2015					CY2016		
	Total	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Total 2013	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Total 2014	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Total 2015	Q1	Q2	Total 2016
Active Component	321	67	61	69	58	255	73	70	58	73	274	60	71	72	63	266	63	57	120
Air Force	50	7	14	15	12	48	19	11	13	19	62	14	17	16	17	64	10	16	26
Army	165	33	28	33	27	121	27	31	31	35	124	33	28	32	27	120	32	20	52
Marine Corps	48	11	12	13	9	45	11	9	6	8	34	3	12	13	11	39	12	11	23
Navy	58	16	7	8	10	41	16	19	8	11	54	10	14	11	8	43	9	10	19
Reserve Component	204	55	56	53	56	220	46	34	48	42	170	42	53	72	45	212	55	46	101
Reserve	72	27	16	23	20	86	24	14	20	21	79	13	21	37	17	88	18	23	41
Air Force Reserve	3	1	2	5	3	11	2	1	3	4	10	1	1	3	4	9	5	2	7
Army Reserve	50	21	11	15	12	59	13	4	15	10	42	9	17	21	7	54	6	12	18
Marine Corps Reserve	11	4	1	2	4	11	4	5	1	2	12	1	1	8	1	11	4	6	10
Navy Reserve	8	1	2	1	1	5	5	4	1	5	15	2	2	5	5	14	3	3	6
National Guard	132	28	40	30	36	134	22	20	28	21	91	29	32	35	28	124	37	23	60
Air National Guard	22	2	2	6	4	14	6	2	4	2	14	8	5	5	3	21	5	4	9
Army National Guard	110	26	38	24	32	120	16	18	24	19	77	21	27	30	25	103	32	19	51

Note: All figures above may be subject to change in future publications as updated information becomes available. Suicide counts are current as of July 29, 2016.

 Indicates a change from the previous QSR based on updated information