

**U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention
Frequently Asked Questions – 2020 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report
November 2020**

What is the 2020 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report?

The 2020 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report includes findings from VA's most recent analysis of Veteran suicide data from 2005 to 2018. Also included in this release are state-level suicide data sheets for the 50 U.S. states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and U.S. island territories.

VA conducts ongoing suicide surveillance to inform Veteran suicide prevention efforts. For the overall Veteran population, this work began in 2016, when VA completed the largest analysis of Veteran suicide to date. The work has continued each year since, with ongoing data enhancements. This year's report examines mortality records from all 50 states and Washington, D.C., for the period 2005 to 2018. The report provides information regarding Veteran suicide counts, suicide rates, and the average number of suicide deaths per day. It also provides data regarding suicide rates among specific Veteran subpopulations; for example, it compares suicide rates among Veterans with and without recent VA health care encounters. The report uses the most comprehensive information regarding Veteran status, the Veteran population, and suicide mortality. For this reason, results should not be compared with information in previous reports: This report provides the most current information for all years.

What is different from the 2019 report (which contained 2017 data)?

This year's report includes new 2018 data on race and ethnicity and also preliminary findings on the COVID-19 pandemic's impacts to date. In addition, due to enhanced data collection accuracy, some findings that were included in the 2019 report have changed.

Why is there a two-year lag for VA's suicide data?

VA's most comprehensive source of Veteran suicide mortality data, including data for all Veterans, and those not receiving care from VA health care, is the VA Mortality Data Repository (MDR). This is the most comprehensive resource regarding Veteran and former Service member mortality. It is based on joint VA and Department of Defense (DoD) searches of the CDC National Center for Health Statistics' National Death Index (NDI). The NDI is considered the national gold standard for U.S. mortality data.

NDI releases death records (upon request) approximately 11 months after the end of the calendar year, at which time VA and DoD search millions of records, identifying the matching death records

and cause of death for Veteran decedents. The Departments then analyze and report on this information. This coordinated, multiagency process leverages the best available data to report on and track Veteran mortality.

How does this data compare with that of previous years?

This recent report provides the most comprehensive data available on Veteran suicide in the years 2005–2018. That data is also included in the *2005–2018 National Suicide Data Appendix*, available at https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/mentalhealth/suicide_prevention/data.asp.

How is “Veteran” defined in this report?

For purposes of the 2020 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report, “Veteran” is defined as someone who has been activated for federal military service and is not currently serving. VA also presents yearly suicide counts of never federally activated former Service members in the report.

Which populations are examined in the report?

The report examines suicide rates for:

- Non-Veteran adults (ages 18 and older)
- Veterans
- Veterans who use VA health care services
- Veteran VA health care patients with a mental health or substance use disorder

The report also examines suicide data for women Veterans and suicide data based on race and ethnicity.

How does VA measure suicide?

- **Suicide count** indicates a total number of suicides. Usually, the count alone has little meaning without reference to the size of the population.
- **Suicide rate** divides the number of suicide deaths by the relevant population count.
- **Percent of decedents** refers to the share of deaths with a given characteristic among all deaths.
- **Percent change in suicide rates** is used to compare changes in age-adjusted rates between years.

Does the updated report include state-level data?

In addition to the 2020 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report, VA has published data sheets on state-level findings — including the number of suicide deaths among Veterans, suicide rates by age group, suicide deaths by method of suicide, and comparisons between state data and



regional and national data. The 2018 state data sheets are available at www.mentalhealth.va.gov/mentalhealth/suicide_prevention/data.asp.

*If you or someone you know is having thoughts of suicide, contact the Veterans Crisis Line to receive free, confidential support and crisis intervention available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. Call **1-800-273-8255 and Press 1**, text to 838255, or chat online at VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat.*