

Army Data Show Rise in Number of Suicides

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The number of soldiers who committed suicide in January could reach 24, a count that would be the highest monthly total since the Army began tabulating suicides in 1980. The latest Army figures, released Thursday, show seven confirmed suicides last month, with another 17 deaths still being investigated. The Army has said the vast majority of suspicious deaths typically turn out to be suicide.

If confirmed, the suicide count for last month would exceed those killed in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan during the same period. In January 2008, five soldiers committed suicide.

“Each of these losses is a personal tragedy that is felt throughout the Army family,” said Gen. Peter Chiarelli, the vice chief of staff of the Army. “The trend and trajectory seen in January further heightens the seriousness and urgency that all of us must have in preventing suicides.”

Suicides among soldiers in 2008 rose for the fourth year in a row, reaching the highest level in nearly three decades. Army officials say the stress of long deployments to war zones plays a role in the increase.

At least 128 soldiers killed themselves last year. The suicide count, which includes soldiers in the Army Reserve and the National Guard, is expected to grow; 15 deaths are still being investigated. The Army announced plans last week to increase its efforts to prevent suicides and to encourage soldiers to seek help for mental health problems. The possibility of 24 suicides in January fueled the concerns of veterans’ advocates who say the Army has failed for years to meet the mental health needs of troops returning home from war.

“In January, we lost more soldiers to suicide than to Al Qaeda,” said Paul Rieckhoff, executive director for Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. “If we lost this many soldiers to an enemy weapon, the entire country would know about it and we would demand defensive measures.”

Mr. Rieckhoff said the Defense Department and the Veterans Affairs Department “must take bold and immediate action.”

Linda Bean, whose son, Sgt. Coleman S. Bean, killed himself in New Jersey in September after two tours of duty in Iraq, one on active-duty with Army and the other with the Maryland National Guard, said it was essential for the Army to persuade soldiers to get mental health help. But Ms. Bean said the reality was that most soldiers were reluctant to seek help for fear it would derail their careers.

The Army needs to encourage its soldiers to get help outside the military system, she said. There are a number of groups willing to help counsel service members and veterans — Give an Hour, The Soldiers Project, Vets4Vets — but the information is not widely available.

“Soldiers won’t take advantage of the Army’s programs because they don’t want an official jacket following them,” said Ms. Bean, whose son received a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder after his first deployment but showed no signs of distress after his second tour of duty. “Let the grateful nation do its part. These groups want to do their part.”