

## VA puts latest estimate of veteran suicides at 20 per day

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In this Dec. 14, 2015, file photo, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs for Health Undersecretary Dr. David Shulkin, center, talks with attendees prior to testifying about the current state of the VA Medical Center in Phoenix at a Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee field hearing in Gilbert, Ariz. The Department of Veterans Affairs says that an average of 20 veterans a day committed suicide in 2014, a slight decrease from a previous government estimate for 2010. Shulkin told The Associated Press that the data used for the latest suicide projections came from every state and U.S. territory and was the largest analysis of veteran records ever undertaken by the department. (AP

Photo/Ross D. Franklin, File)

On average, 20 veterans a day committed suicide in 2014, a slight decrease from the previous government estimate, but federal health officials are cautious about concluding the suicide problem is getting better.

Rather, they say the Department of Veterans Affairs is relying on a more comprehensive database than ever before, making comparisons to prior studies difficult and possibly offering a truer snapshot than what was captured in the past.

In 2013, the VA projected that 22 veterans a day were committing suicide. The number became a fixture in media stories and in comments from politicians and advocacy groups highlighting the prevalence of the problem. But the number was also based on data submitted from fewer than half of the states. Some states with many veterans were not part of that study, including California and Texas. Veterans groups urged the department to expand its database and incorporate Department of Defense records to identify veterans who had not enrolled in the VA's numerous programs. And that's what it has done.

Dr. David Shulkin, undersecretary for health at the Department of Veterans Affairs, told The Associated Press that the data used for the latest suicide projections came from every state and U.S. territory and was the largest analysis of veteran records ever undertaken by the department. He said the data gives the VA more information about where to direct resources and which veterans are most at-risk of suicide, but he's hesitant to make any firm determinations about the overall trend and whether it's getting better.

"Twenty a day is not that different from 22," Shulkin said. "It is far too high."

The attention on veteran suicide comes at a time when the VA has reported a huge upswing in veterans seeking medical care as they have returned from conflicts in the Middle East. Yet, the VA data continues to show that older veterans make up most suicides. About two-thirds of all veterans who died by suicide were age 50 and over.

The rate of suicides for non-veterans has also been increasing in recent years, but the rate has increased at a greater pace for veterans. That's particularly the case for [female veterans](#). The risk for suicide is 2.4 times higher for female veterans than it is for female civilians.

In 2014, the rate of suicide among veteran females was 18.9 per 100,000. The rate of suicide for females in the civilian population was 7.2 per 100,000, the VA said.

Shulkin called preventing suicide the VA's top priority. He said the department added 446 new psychologists last year and 80 new psychiatrists. It's also adding 60 employees to the Veterans Crisis Line and making it easier for veterans calling their local VA medical facilities to connect directly to the suicide hotline.

He said the VA data also shows that those who receive mental health care from the VA are less likely to commit [suicide](#) than those who don't get care. He said it's critical to destigmatize getting counseling so that people feel comfortable reaching out. He said the VA is intent on partnering with advocacy groups and U.S. companies to ensure [veterans](#) get help.

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