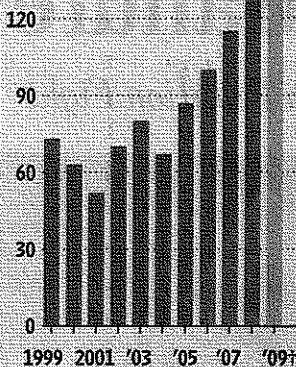


## WORLD NEWS

### Self-Inflicted Wounds

Suicides among active-duty Army personnel\*



\*Includes unconfirmed suicides; †Through October; Source: U.S. Army

## Suicide Toll Fuels Worry That Army Is Strained

BY YOCHI J. DREAZEN

Sixteen American soldiers killed themselves in October in the U.S. and on duty overseas, an unusually high monthly toll that is fueling concerns about the mental health of the nation's military personnel after more than eight years of continuous warfare.

The Army's top generals worry that surging tens of thousands more troops into Afghanistan could increase the strain felt by many military personnel after years of repeated deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan.

The October suicide figures mean that at least 134 active-duty soldiers have taken their own lives so far this year, putting the Army on pace to break last year's record of 140 active-duty suicides. The number of Army suicides has risen 37% since 2006, and last year, the suicide rate surpassed that of the U.S. population for the first time.

The health of ground combat forces is emerging as an element of the Obama administration's review of its Afghanistan strategy. Conditions there have deteriorated in recent months amid lingering political instability and a worsening Taliban-led insurgency.

Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the top American commander in Kabul, wants more than 40,000 new troops, in addition to the 68,000 that will be in Afghanistan by year-end, and has warned that the U.S. faces possible "mission failure" unless it adopts a new strategy and quickly deploys significant reinforcements.

Some senior military officials worry that the troop-increase plans under discussion at the White House would require the Army and Marine Corps to keep forces in Afghanistan longer, or give forces less time in the U.S. between deployments, increasing the strain on military personnel.

At a White House meeting Friday, the Joint Chiefs of Staff urged President Barack Obama to send fresh troops to Afghanistan only if they have spent at least a year in the U.S. since their last overseas tour, according to people familiar with the matter. If Mr. Obama agreed to that condition, many potential Afghanistan reinforcements wouldn't be available until next summer at the earliest.

A recent study by the Institute for the Study of War, a Washington think tank, concluded that the U.S. has only three Army and Marine brigades—about 11,000 to 15,000 troops—capable of deploying to Afghanistan this year after spending at least 12 months back in the U.S.

Army officials say the strain of repeated deployments with minimal time back in the U.S. is one of the biggest factors fueling the rise in military suicides.

The Army hit a grim milestone last year when the suicide rate exceeded that of the general population for the first time: 20.2 per 100,000 people in the military, compared with the civilian rate of 19.5 per 100,000. The Army's suicide rate was 12.7 per 100,000 in 2005, 15.3 in 2006 and 16.8 in 2007.

In response, the Army has launched a broad push to better understand military suicide and develop new ways of preventing it. In August, the Army and the National Institute of Mental Health said they would conduct a five-year, \$50 million effort to better identify the factors that cause some soldiers to take their own lives.

A continuing Army suicide-prevention effort has shown modest signs of progress. Forty-one active-duty soldiers killed themselves in January and February, but the monthly suicide tallies for 2009, until October, were lower than the comparable periods in 2008. Army officials are now trying to determine whether the high October numbers were an anomaly or the start of a new upsurge in military suicides.

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