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Suicide Rate Among Young Women Veterans More Than Twice That of Civilians

Young women veterans are nearly three times as likely as civilians to commit suicide, according to new research published by researchers at Portland State University (PSU) and Oregon Health & Science University (OHSU).

The paper, "Self-Inflicted Deaths Among Women With U.S. Military Service: A Hidden Epidemic?" appears in the December 2010 issue of *Psychiatric Services*, a journal published by the American Psychiatric Association. This work is the first general population study of current suicide risk among women who've served in the U.S. military.

According to the data, female veterans aged 18 to 34 are at highest risk. "Women veterans are more likely to complete suicide than nonveteran women," said Bentson McFarland, M.D., Ph.D., a Professor of Psychiatry in the OHSU School of Medicine. McFarland co-authored the paper with Mark Kaplan, Dr.P.H., and Nathalie Huguét, Ph.D., of Portland State University.

"The rate was lower in the next oldest age group we studied, aged 35 to 44, and the rate was lower still among those aged 45 to 64. However, even within this age group, the rate was higher than civilian women's suicide rates."

The study examined data on 5,948 female suicides committed between 2004 and 2007. In the 18 to 34 age group alone, there were:

56 suicides among 418,132 female veterans (1 in 7,465).

1,461 suicides among 33,257,362 nonveterans (1 in 22,763).

"This study shows that young women veterans have nearly triple the suicide rate of young women who never served in the military," said Kaplan, co-author of the study and professor of Community Health at PSU. "The elevated rates of suicide among women veterans should be a call-to-action, especially for clinicians and caregivers to be aware of warning signs and helpful prevention resources such as the Veterans Suicide Prevention Hotline [1-800-273-TALK (8255) press "1"]."

The research, funded by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, was conducted by tracking suicide data in the 16 states that constitute the National Violent Death Reporting System, a program within the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.