

30 percent of Iraq, Afghanistan veterans have mulled suicide: survey

By Bill Briggs, NBC News contributor

Nearly one third of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans have contemplated suicide, according to [survey results](#) released Wednesday, underscoring the dark depths of a mental-health crisis that has gripped the U.S. military and the American veteran community in recent years.

In addition, 45 percent of the 4,000-plus survey respondents said they know of an Iraq or Afghanistan veteran who has attempted suicide, reports the group behind the poll, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) — the largest advocacy organization for men and women who served in the wars, representing about younger 170,000 veterans. Some 2.2 million Americans have been deployed to those countries.

"That 30 percent have considered suicide is a high number. But what I look at from the survey is: We have 43 percent of the respondents saying that they are not seeking mental-health care because of a perceived negative impact to their career," said Jason Hansman, an Iraq veteran and now senior program manager for health at IAVA.

"Also, 80 percent of the respondents say they don't think the veterans are getting the care that they need. That speaks to the collective mental health of this community," Hansman added.

Two of the most common post-war themes haunting Iraq and Afghanistan veterans include the massive [disability-benefits backlog](#) within the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs — the entity designated to handle their health care — and the estimated [20 percent](#) of those veterans who are struggling with symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

The Army, the branch with the largest portion of combat troops, [reported July](#)

18 that 134 soldiers — including active-duty members, reserves and those in the National Guard — had committed "potential" suicide through the end of May. (Some of those deaths remain under investigation and await official designation).

More stunning: The Army's suicide pace far outstrips the number of American troops killed in Afghanistan (52) through May: according to iCasualties.org, which tracks deaths in that war.

What's equally troubling to suicide-prevention experts is the high rate veterans who have mulled suicide while skipping treatment due to stigma, career fears or VA frustrations.

"That number (30 percent) is higher than we should ever tolerate," said Alan L. Berman, executive director of the American Association of Suicidology (AAS). The organization strives to better understand and prevent suicide.

"As a society, we have to be concerned and it demands a response that is geared toward doing all possible to prevent thoughts from turning into action," Berman said.

By contrast, 3.3 percent of the U.S. population over the age of 18 has considered suicide during the past 12 months, and 13.5 percent of American adults has weighed the option of killing themselves during their lifetime, according to two AAS studies that each involved about 5,000 participants. (Berman cautioned that comparing the suicide-ideation rate among veterans with that of the general population is tricky math given that most people who served in the recent wars tend to be under age 40 and suicide rates are higher among younger people).

The good news, however, is that those 30 percent of veterans who acknowledged contemplating suicide are still alive, Hansman said.

"Certainly, there's something stopping them from taking their life. That's due to

education that organizations like IAVA are doing, and the education that the VA is doing to (promote) the veteran crisis hotline, where the number of calls has risen year-over-year and month-over-month," Hansman added.

Still, only 37 percent of the ex-service members polled said they would call the VA's veteran crisis line — 800-273-TALK (8255) — if they were feeling suicidal.

"They don't want to say they're suicidal to a government hotline. Now, we know how that hotline runs. We trust it completely (in terms of) keeping veteran information confidential, how it will not get back into their service record or hurt their career," Hansman said. "But there is still that anxiety around talking to the VA or talking to the DOD about your issues."

Inside the military, there's also an old stigma that seeking mental-health help is a sign of weakness — a sentiment both the VA and Pentagon are working to shatter.

"It's not overt. Your commander is not telling you: 'Don't go to mental health (services) because you're going to hurt your career.' It's just something that gets passed down (from other troops)," Hansman said. "Everyone carries around a horror story, whether it's true or not, about a guy or girl they know that sought mental health help and their career was over."

"It's entrenched in the military but it's something that can be changed," he added. "Stigma can be overcome. It's going to take a lot of work. But I think we, as a nation, should be up to the task."