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Researchers to seek out explanations for higher suicide rate in military

By Colleen O'Connor
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The U.S. Army will spend \$17 million over the next three years trying to figure out why the rate of suicide in the military has outpaced the rate among civilians in the past five years.

The Military Suicide Research Consortium, a project announced Wednesday, will conduct cutting-edge explorations into suicide in the military that can have applications in the civilian population, including Colorado — where the 2009 suicide rate was 18.4 per 100,000, a 20-year high and significantly higher than the military rate.

But the consortium's immediate concern is the

suicide rate in the military, which has surpassed that of the general U.S. population.

"Historically, being in the military was a protection against suicide," said Peter Gutierrez, a national expert on suicide research who works at the Mental Illness Research, Educational and Clinical Center at the Denver Veterans Affairs Medical Center. "The rates were significantly lower than in the general population. That's no longer true, and it's very perplexing to us."

The suicide rate of the military last year was 12.5 per 100,000 people, compared with the national rate of 11.1, according to a Defense Department task force.

The task force reported that 309 members of the military died from suicide last year, up from 267 in 2008.

From 2005 to 2009, it said, more than 1,100 service members committed suicide, which is about one suicide every 36 hours.

The research will be co-directed by Gutierrez and Thomas Joiner, a psychology professor at Florida State University.

The Denver VA Medical Center and FSU have each been awarded \$8.5 million to address this public-health issue. The project is the first collaboration of military and civilian efforts to support military-relevant research across a variety of areas: behavioral health, emergency departments and primary-care clinics.

Gutierrez said the rising suicide rate in the military "may be a function of the nature of the current conflict, with multiple deployments and the amount of time the wars went on.

"But our country fought in other wars that went on for very long times, where people were away for extended periods and keeping in touch with family and friends back home was much more difficult than it is now.

"Clearly something is going on, and the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs are very interested in finding out what it is."

The new consortium is different from the \$50 million five-year study that the Army and the National Institute of Mental Health began in 2008. That research focuses on identifying risk-and-resilience factors, while the consortium will conduct research into suicide assessment, prevention and intervention.

A main component will be a "virtual library" that will catalog and warehouse the consortium's studies, as well as research conducted by other teams around the world.

The clearinghouse, kept at FSU, will allow for easy access online by policymakers who need to make decisions about the military forces.

Extensive research has been conducted on assessing risk for suicide in the civilian population, but little is known about how relevant that information is to the military

population.

"In places like Afghanistan or Iraq, it is not a simple matter to administer a questionnaire to someone," said Col. Carl Castro, director of Military Operational Medicine Research Program, which established the consortium. "There are real challenges in the (military) theater that need to be confronted in all aspects of suicide prevention, assessment and intervention."

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