

Australia: Royal Commission details high suicide rate among soldiers and veterans

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On September 9, Labor Defence Minister Richard Marles tabled the final report of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide in the Australian parliament. The report is a cover-up for the long-standing neglect of military veterans under Liberal-National and Labor governments.

Despite more than 750 recommendations in previous inquiries and reviews, there has been no sustained reduction in the high rates of suicide and suicidality among serving and ex-serving Australian Defence Force (ADF) members over the last 20 years. Like those that came before, this report will not change things one iota.

The final report is the outcome of a three-year investigation called after an Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) report found that 1,273 suicides had occurred between 2001 and 2019 among military personnel and veterans.

The inquiry received nearly 6,000 submissions from current and former ADF personnel, their families and supporters. Evidence was provided by over 340 witnesses, including leading figures of the ADF and ministers for defence and veterans' affairs.

The report details various causal factors and outlines "preventative" measures for the staggering levels of suicide and suicide-related incidents within the (ADF).

Stopping Australia's barbaric military operations abroad was not one of the recommendations. On the contrary, the report noted "growing instability" in the Asia-Pacific region, implying the need for an expansion of Australia's armed forces, specifically for a US-led war against China, its main economic rival.

The concern of Australia's defence chiefs and imperialist leaders is not the welfare of soldiers and veterans, but the "hollowing out" of the ADF, which presents an obstacle to this escalation. There is a major

workforce shortage in the ADF, as a result of high turnover, ongoing failure to meet recruitment targets and the large number of personnel unavailable for medical reasons.

Matt Yannopoulos, associate secretary of the department of defence, told the commission: "The hollowness is made up of the approximate 10 percent vacancy rate and 15 percent medically unavailable. As at November 2023, the organisation is 4,259 [personnel] (6.8 percent) below AFS [average funded strength] guidance."

Based on AIHW figures, the commission found, "an average of 78 serving or ex-serving ADF members have died by suicide each year for the past 10 years. This equates to an average of three deaths every fortnight."

The report notes that these figures "understate the actual number of suicide deaths." Personnel who left the armed forces before 1985 are not counted, excluding many who served in Vietnam. Moreover, the AIHW numbers underreport suicide deaths before 1997, as death records from the time were not as comprehensive. These figures also only include deaths officially recorded as suicide and therefore exclude deaths where the intent was undetermined.

The suicide rate for men in the permanent forces more than doubled in the span of two decades, from 13.9 per 100,000 per year in 1997–99, to 28.4 in 2019–21. Men in the permanent forces are 30 percent more likely to die by suicide than average Australian employed males. Men serving in combat and security roles are twice as likely to die by suicide than employed males overall.

Some 8 percent of serving ADF personnel suffer from post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), compared with 5.7 percent in the broader Australian population, while

the rate for veterans is 17.7 percent. Many things can cause PTSD, including injury, seeing injury or death, threat of death, being mugged or sexually assaulted, witnessing large-scale human suffering, and not knowing how to react in a dangerous scenario.

Common symptoms include reliving events, sometimes as flashbacks, avoiding anything which may recall the event/s, as well as negative thoughts and feelings, including anger, fear, shame and guilt, and feeling agitated. A 2010 report estimated that as many as 90 percent of ADF personnel experienced at least one potentially traumatic event in their life.

A study into combatants deployed to the Middle East between 2010 and 2012 found that, as soldiers were repeatedly deployed and exposed to further combat, their health deteriorated. The effects included greater risk for new-onset depression, increases in various forms of alcohol misuse and an increased risk of new-onset PTSD symptoms. Additionally, the study showed elevated hypertension and respiratory problems, both of which are specifically linked to experiencing multiple battle traumas.

The Middle East conflicts in question were the US-led neo-colonial wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, in which Australian Special Forces were among the worst perpetrators of war crimes. These atrocities included the murder of unarmed civilians and prisoners, while physical torture and abuse were routinely used to suppress the impoverished population.

This barbarism, overseen by the top military brass, and the effect on those expected to inflict it do not rate a mention in the report, which refers vaguely to trauma as an inherent component of “the unique nature of military service.”

The report also found that ex-ADF members experienced higher rates of long-term mental health conditions and “deaths of despair,” which refers to deaths caused by suicide, drug or alcohol poisoning, chronic liver disease, or cirrhosis. Men and women who have served in the permanent forces are 21 percent and 81 percent, respectively, more likely to die from deaths of despair than the population as a whole.

This is just one aspect of the social crisis confronting veterans. According to a 2019 inquiry by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, estimated 5,800 ADF veterans (5.3 percent) experience homelessness every year, compared with 1.9 percent of the broader

population. Unemployment rates and risk of financial insecurity are also higher among veterans than the general population.

The Royal Commission report insists, “Suicide is preventable and a reduction in rates of suicide and suicidality among serving and ex-serving ADF members is possible.” But there will be no end to the underlying cause of the damage to soldiers’ mental and physical health—the fact that they are compelled to carry out the murderous will of the imperialist state against their counterparts in the international working class.

In fact, the aim of the report’s recommendations is the opposite: “to build a stronger, more resilient ADF, capable of meeting Australia’s future defence challenges.”

This is the agenda behind the feigned concern and moral outcry from the bourgeois political establishment since the report was released. The extreme suicide rate of veterans and soldiers has been known for decades. The level of military suicides was of no concern until it became a clear issue for recruitment and retention of personnel, as the Australian ruling class seeks to ramp up the size of the armed forces in preparation for a US-led war against China.



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