

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Report: Serving and ex-serving Australian Defence Force members who have served since 1985: suicide monitoring 1997-2020.

Caution: This paper includes information about numbers and rates of death by suicide for serving and ex-serving members of the ADF. If the following content raises issues for you, don't go through it alone:

- Open Arms 24/7 Support Line (1800 011 046)
- Suicide Call Back Service (1300 659 467)
- Lifeline 24/7 Crisis Support (13 11 14)
- Beyond Blue Support Service (1300 224 636)

Background

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) published the [fifth annual report about suicide](#) among permanent, reserve, and ex-serving ADF members on 16 November 2022.

The general patterns reported, including rates of suicide and comparisons with the Australian population, remain similar to previous years' reporting from the AIHW.

The report will be used to inform the work of the Australian Government, ADF, health and other services. For RSL Queensland the report can help inform and reinforce planning, delivery and engagement with stakeholders, and to ensure the needs of current and ex-serving members with particular vulnerabilities, continue to be met.

Key findings:

Permanent and reserve males (currently serving) have a lower risk of suicide.	Permanent and reserve males are half as likely to die by suicide as Australian males (49 per cent and 46 per cent lower respectively).
Ex-serving males and females have an increased risk of suicide.	Ex-serving males are 27 per cent more likely to die by suicide than Australian males, and ex-serving females are 107 per cent, or twice, as likely to die by suicide than Australian females (Note: these rates vary within the sub-populations of the ex-serving cohort).
Males who separate voluntarily from the ADF have similar rates of suicide to the Australian population.	This finding is similar to the general Australian population as measured by age-adjusted suicide rate.
Males who separate for involuntary medical reasons have an increased risk of suicide.	The suicide rate for ADF ex-serving males who separate for involuntary medical reasons is around three times the rates of those who separate voluntarily (69.8 per cent and 22.5 per 100,000 population per year respectively).
Mood (affective) disorders (including depression) were the most common risk factor.	Around half (49 per cent) of all ADF males and two-thirds (66 per cent) of all ADF females (serving and ex-serving) who died by suicide were identified as having mood (affective) disorders.

Problems in spousal relationship and suicide ideation were the second and third most common risk factors for males.	Around 4 in 10 (41 per cent) ADF males who died by suicide were identified as having problems in spousal relationship circumstances, with almost on-third (29 per cent) identified as having suicide ideation.
Personal history of self-harm and problems in spousal relationship were the second and third most common risk factors for females.	Almost two in five (38 per cent) of ADF females who died by suicide were identified as having a personal history of self-harm, and problems in spousal relationship circumstances (38 per cent).
Length of service appears to impact on risk of suicide.	Ex-serving members with 1-5 years of service appear to be at increased risk of dying by suicide in comparison to ex-serving members with shorter or longer periods of service.

Comment

That the report identifies that rates of suicide for serving and ex-serving members and the Australia population have not changed is of concern. There is significant Australian and international research, including from the [Australian Institute for Suicide Research and Prevention](#) (AISRAP), which identifies that deaths by suicide are preventable through the provision of awareness raising activities, timely intervention and support services.

The AIWH report reflects the continued need for attention to be paid to the particular needs of people who choose to serve in the ADF. It identifies that joining the ADF reduces the risk of dying by suicide for males, but that leaving the ADF increases the risk of dying by suicide for both males and females.

It is important to highlight that many ex-serving members experience positive service and transition from the ADF, and to understand the factors that contribute to those experiences. These elements were not included in this AIWH report but are included in the AIWH's earlier [Socioeconomic characteristics of ex-serving ADF members who died by suicide report](#) which informed the recent [Interim report of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide](#).

The socioeconomic characteristics of ex-serving ADF members that are considered to be protective factors were identified as job security, housing and income stability, positive spousal relationship settings, and being more than 40 years old.

The impact of unemployment, job insecurity and underemployment on suicidal behaviour is not limited to the veteran population. AISRAP has investigated interventions delivered through [workplace suicide prevention strategies](#), assessing impact at the individual and population level.

The AIWH suicide monitoring report identifies those ex-serving cohorts with significantly increased risk of dying by suicide as being:

- female
- males who have separate involuntarily for medical reasons
- males and females experiencing mood (affective disorders)
- males and females with problems in spousal relationships, and
- males and females with a personal history of self-harm.

Length, but not type, of service appears to be a contributing factor to increasing the risk of an ex-serving member dying by suicide. With suicide rates for ex-serving males and females decreased as length of service increases. Increased risk is reported as highest for those who served between 1 and 5 years (26.1 per cent of males and 31.8 per cent of females). This may be linked to a higher incidence of separation for involuntary medical reasons occurring during the 1–5-year period of service, however, this is not linked in the report. Interestingly, the average time since separation does not appear to change the rate of suicide for ex-serving males or females.

Informing the work of RSL Queensland

The underlying issues that the AIWH report highlights only adds greater emphasis to the importance and immediate need for veteran services as well as support for veterans and their families.

While joining the ADF might be considered a protective factor, leaving the ADF can be considered a significant risk factor for the vulnerable cohorts identified above. This is not new information for RSL Queensland but does confirm the continued need to respond to the heightened risk factors within certain cohorts of the ex-serving community.

The elements of serving in the ADF that contribute as protective factors might also be those experienced beyond job security, housing and income stability such as, continued education and learning, career pathways, healthcare, known routine, rules, expectations and consequences, camaraderie, belonging and a strong sense of purpose.

How RSL Queensland supports veterans

The Australian Bureau of Statistics' Census showed more than 28% of current serving and ex-serving ADF members lived in Queensland in 2021. RSL Queensland, and its wholly-owned subsidiary Mates4Mates, funded tens of millions of dollars annually into programs, partnerships and services addressing veteran mental health and wellbeing issues.

In May 2021, in partnership with the Gallipoli Medical Research Foundation (GMRF), RSL Queensland launched *Go Beyond* - a free, online, self-directed training program that is designed to help guide all ex-serving Australian veterans through their adjustment to civilian life.

Go Beyond was the outcome of a six-year Service to Civilian Life Study completed by GMRF and funded by RSL Queensland as part of its ongoing \$14 million commitment to veterans' mental health initiatives and research. This study was the first qualitative investigation of its kind undertaken in Australia and one of the largest studies examining military transition in the world

In addition to investing in research programs, RSL Queensland provides a range of services and programs which help veterans, and their families. This includes wellbeing and welfare assistance and critical support through counselling, RSL Queensland employment program, scholarships, financial aid, and homelessness and accommodation services.

RSL Queensland also partners with several other organisations to offer a wide range of programs to improve veterans' mental and physical resilience and encourage social connection. These initiatives span respite programs for veterans and families through to research-based wellbeing initiatives aimed at assisting veterans to overcome personal challenges.

RSL Queensland supports Diggers Rest, Trojan's Trek, PTSD Resurrected, Veterans Care Association, 4 Aussie Heroes, RSL RAEMUS Rover Off-Road Racing, Legacy Brisbane Family Weekends, Operation PTSD Support and Human Performance initiatives through Department of Defence.

In summary, the AIWH report signals the need for RSL Queensland to continue its commitment to fund and enable programs that promote a healthy transition to civilian life to invest in programs.

Advocacy and action for the provision of awareness raising and early-intervention services to current serving members within their first year of ADF service can help address the AIWH's findings about increased risk of death by suicide linked to 1-5 years of service. The continuous improvement of delivery frameworks, governance and metrics of success are critical to increasing the ability of RSL Queensland and the wider ESO sector to help reduce the rates of deaths by suicide across the veteran population.

For any enquiries regarding this report, please email partnerships@rslqld.org