



# Mental health and defence

**Working in the armed services brings its own set of unique challenges that require additional support for both serving and ex-serving military personnel.**

It's widely appreciated that the nature and requirements of the job can have huge impacts on the health and wellbeing of Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel.

Not only can defence force work be physically dangerous, it can also be mentally challenging. There have been concerns for many years that this may underpin a higher suicide rate among ex-serving veterans of the ADF compared to the general population. In 2016 the Australian Government held an inquiry into suicide by veterans and ex-service personnel and in 2017 produced the report, [The Constant Battle: Suicide by Veterans](#). One of the recommendations of this inquiry was that a National Veteran Suicide Register be maintained. In response, the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) commissioned the AIHW to report on the number and rate of suicide deaths among those who have served in Australia's armed services. In 2018 the AIHW [released National suicide monitoring of serving and ex-serving Australian Defence Force personnel](#), followed by an update in 2019. Both reports attracted much national media coverage.

The reports were based on the analysis of the records of thousands of ADF personnel who had served at least one day or more from 2001, examining the incidence of suicide among serving and ex-serving personnel and further identifying characteristics that were possibly linked with suicide risk. The AIHW figures showed that the suicide rate in serving and reserve men was lower than that for men of the same age in the general population. Conversely, the reports noted that the rate of suicide in men after they'd left the services was higher than for men of the same age in the general population. Detailed analysis looking into factors associated with suicide was published in the 2018 report *Incidence of suicide in serving and ex-serving Australian Defence Force personnel: detailed analysis 2001-2015*. This report found that lower rank, younger age and being discharged on medical grounds were all associated with a higher risk of suicide in ex-serving men.

The Australian Government responded swiftly and strongly to the reports and in 2020 announced a new Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy and Action Plan. As part of that plan, the ADF has implemented more prevention and early intervention strategies to improve the health and wellbeing for serving, reserve and ex-serving personnel and their families.

'The work of AIHW, in providing data on the incidence of suicide in current and former ADF personnel, has helped increase our understanding of the complex issue of veteran suicide,' explains Moira Campbell, Assistant Secretary, Wellbeing Policy with the DVA. 'The Institute's data is used to inform the development of suicide prevention programs and ensure services best support the mental health and wellbeing of veterans and their families.'

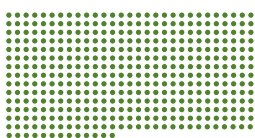
A notable addition to the 2019 report was a review of figures regarding suicide in female ADF personnel. Mirroring the AIHW findings for male personnel, the review revealed that an area of concern around suicide for women was after they had left the ADF. The report showed that for ADF personnel from 2002–2017, the age-adjusted rate of suicide in ex-serving women was more than twice that seen in the general population. Historically low numbers of women in the ADF are on the rise and the ADF plans that by 2023 female participation will have increased by 25% for the Navy and Airforce and 15% for the Army compared to 2017.

As well as further suicide prevention and mental health support services being provided for serving and ex-serving ADF personnel and their families, eligible transitioning ADF members now automatically receive a DVA Health Card, which can be used to access treatment for any mental health condition, regardless of whether or not it is related to their service.

'From 1 July 2019, all those leaving the ADF will be able to access an annual comprehensive health assessment by a GP for the first 5 years after they discharge,' the Minister for Veterans' Affairs, Darren Chester, announced following the release of the AIHW reports.

'This is a \$2.1 million commitment from the Australian government and will assist in the early detection and treatment of mental and physical health concerns during transition to civilian life, addressing a high-risk period for the emergence of mental health conditions and suicide.'

### In 2001–2017:



There were **419 suicides** in serving, reserve & ex-serving ADF personnel

The **age-adjusted rate of suicide in serving and reserve men** was **48% lower** than in Australian men in general



The **age-adjusted rate of suicide in ex-serving men** was **18% higher** than in Australian men in general