

Veteran Suicide Is a National Disgrace

We Love Our Service Members . . .

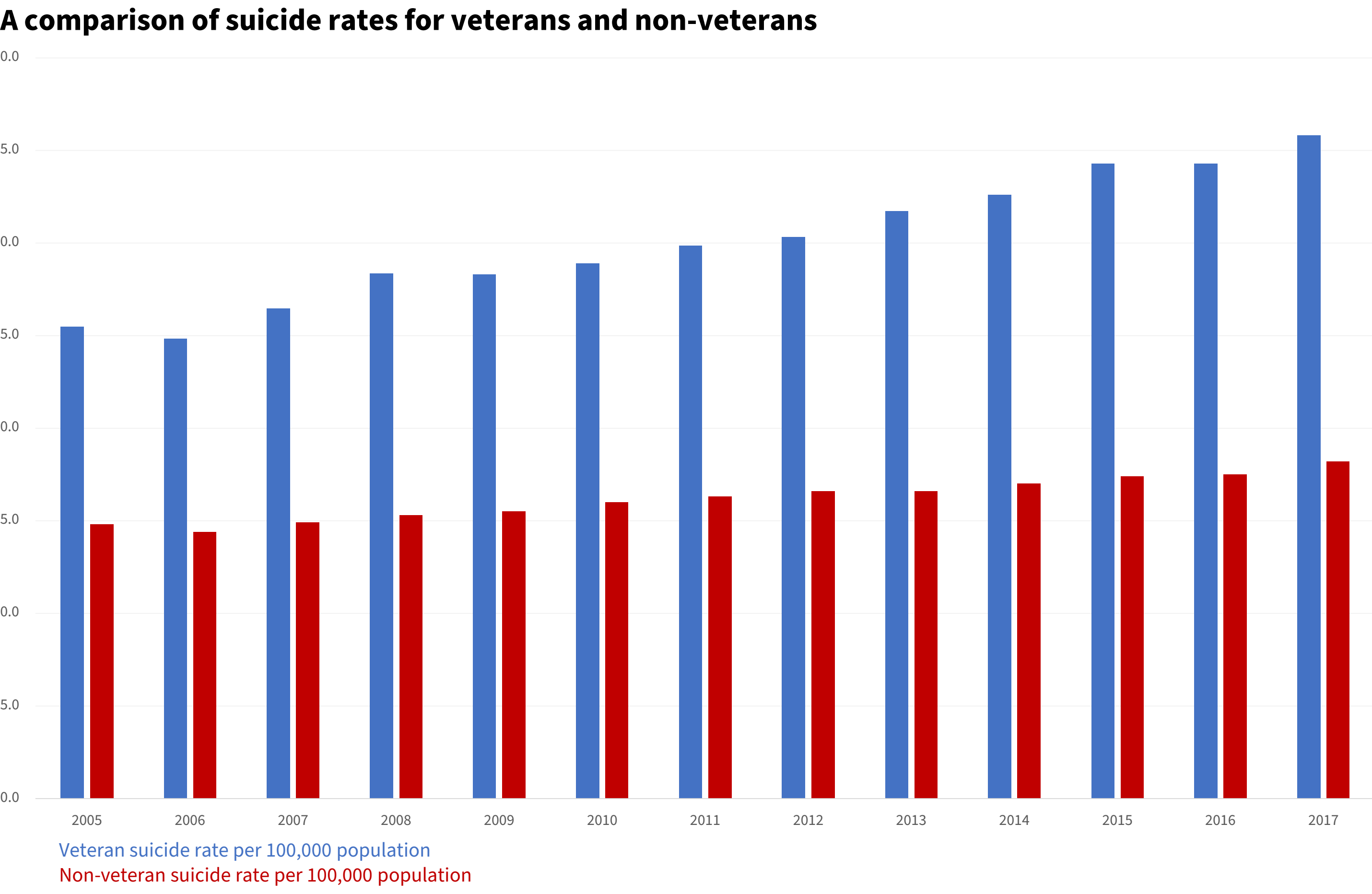
We see a service member in uniform, and our response is almost automatic. “Thank you for your service.” We pick up their meal tab or their drink tab. We feel good, and they feel appreciated (we hope)

Until They Become Veterans

But what happens when that service member separates? When that service member becomes a veteran? We can’t tell a veteran from a non-veteran. There is no uniform that says “I served.” So we forget them. We forget their service and we forget their sacrifice.

But Isn’t Suicide a National Problem?

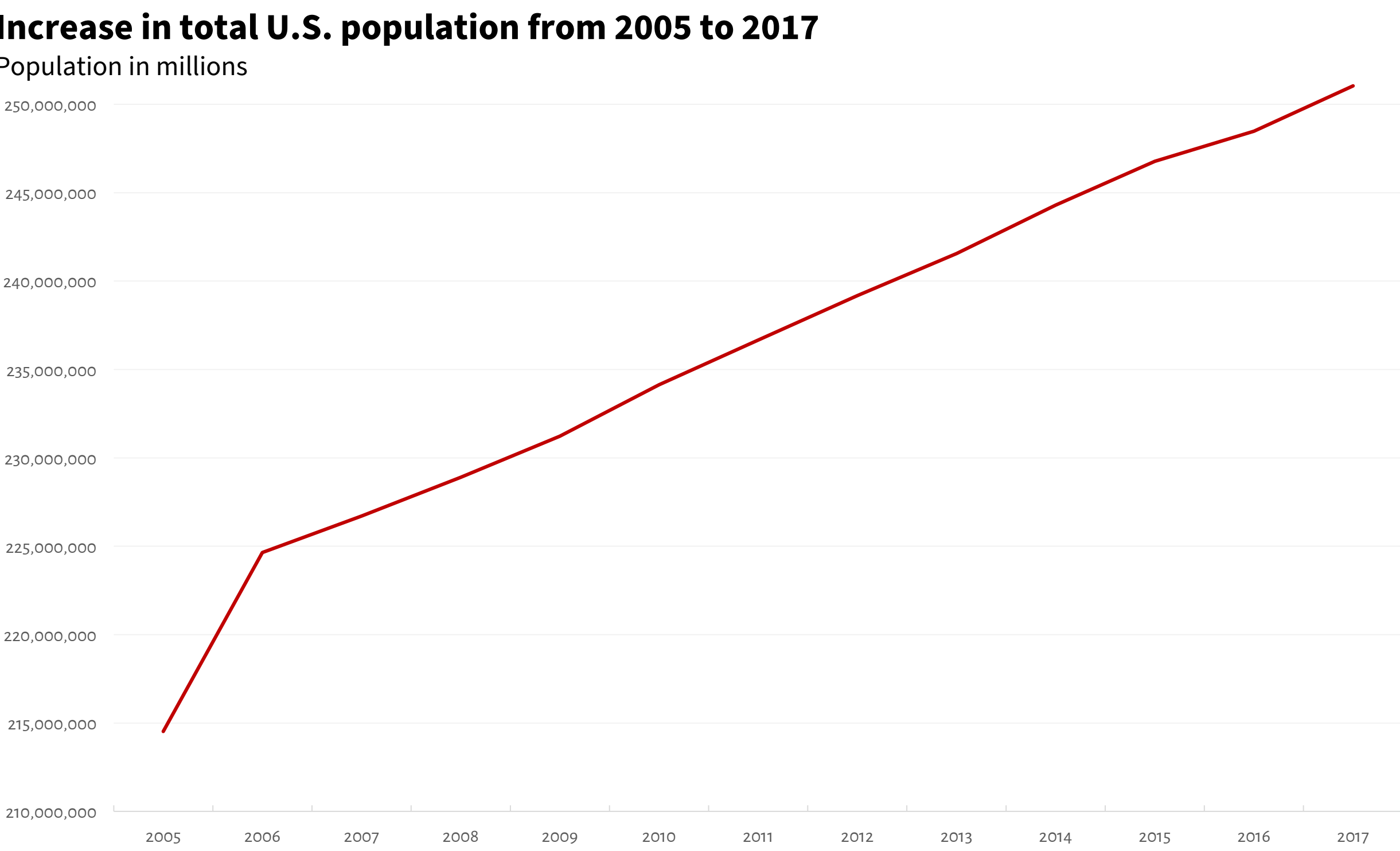
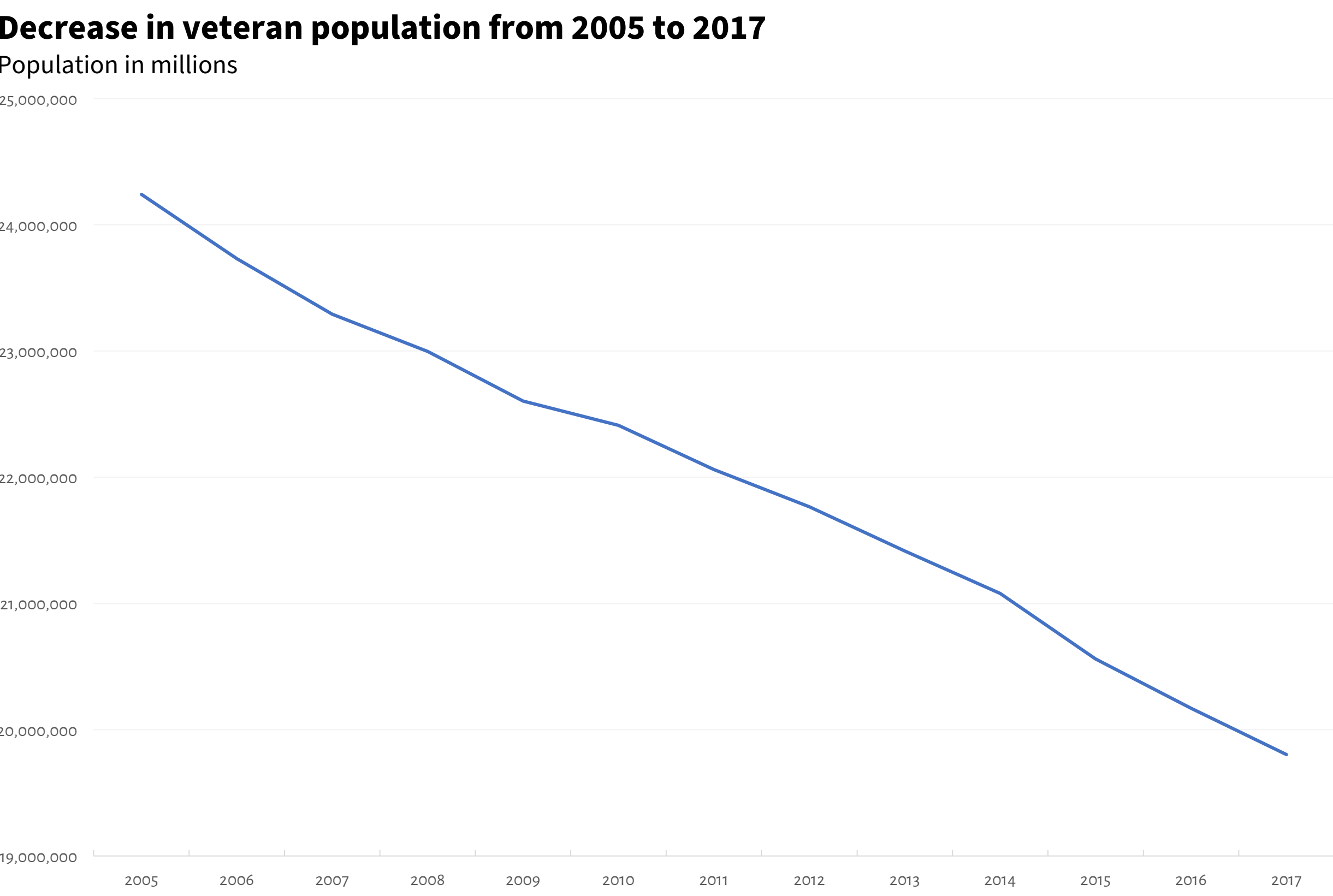
It is. We see that in the graph below, which compares the suicide rate for veterans and non-veterans over the 13-year period from 2005 to 2017. The suicide rate for the non-veteran shows a small increase from 2005 to 2017. This same graph clearly shows that the suicide rate of our veterans is much higher than the rate for our non-veterans. The rate of suicide increase is also greater for our veterans than for our non-veterans.



As Our Adult Population Increases, Our Veteran Population Decreases

The previous graph shows the stark contrast in the suicide rate between the veteran and non-veteran populations. Another way to illustrate the difference is to compare the change in the veteran population from 2005 to 2017 with the change in the total U.S. adult population over the same period. During that time, the veteran population has *decreased* from

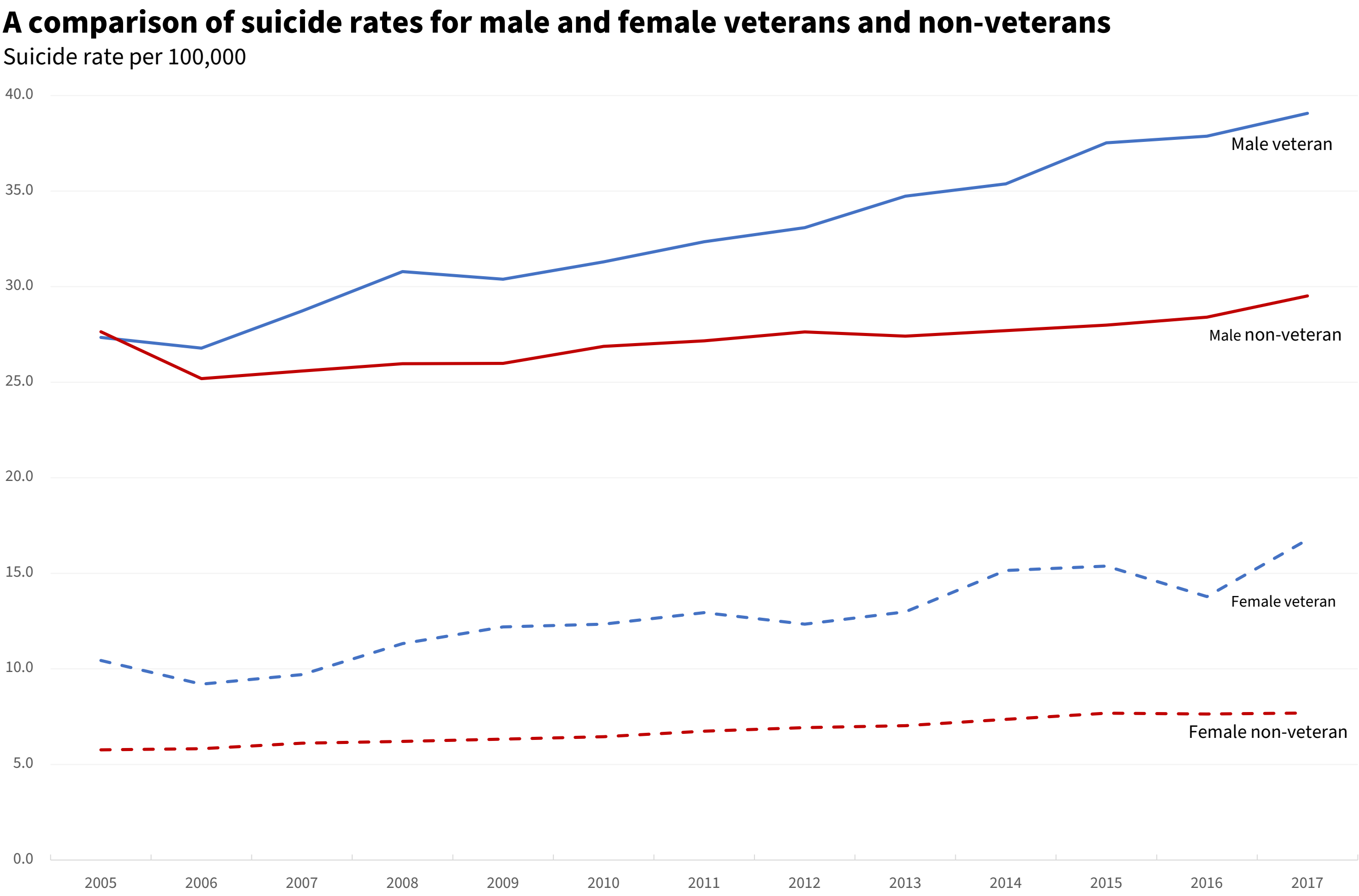
approximately 24 million to nearly 20 million. The overall adult population has *increased* from 214.5 million to 251 million. As a percentage of the adult population, the veteran numbers have decreased from 11.3 percent to 7.9 percent. When viewed this way, the problem of veteran suicide should be even more alarming.



Suicide Is not Limited to Our Male Servicemembers

During the war in Vietnam, about 7,500 women served in Southeast Asia. Most of those women were nurses. Although women have only recently been allowed to serve in direct combat roles, their roles in combat support positions have placed them in harm’s way. During the actions in Iraq and Afghanistan, for example, more than

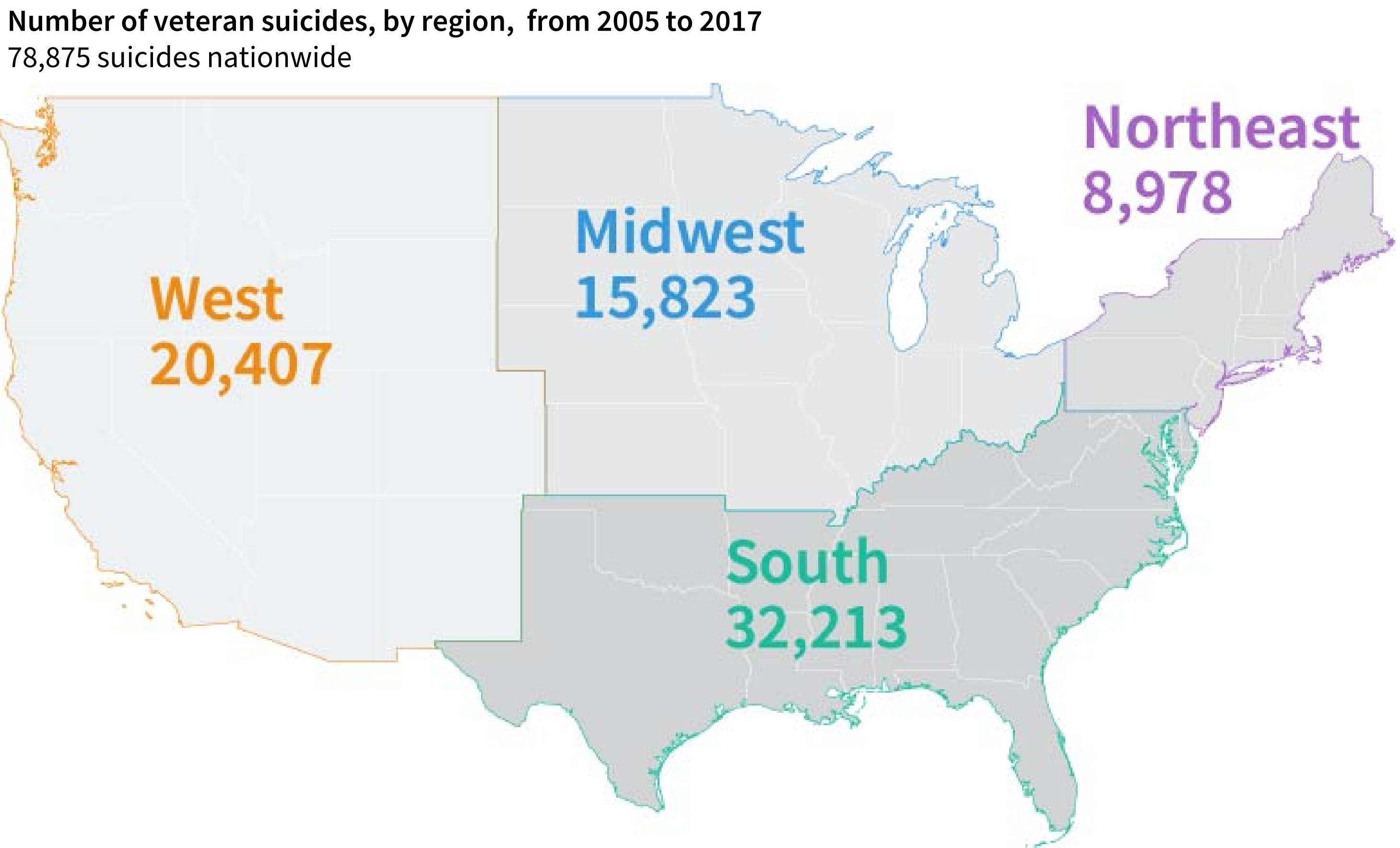
150,000 women were deployed and more than 600 were wounded. As a result of their combat experience, female veterans are now subject to the same stressors as our male combat veterans. The following chart provides a comparison of male and female veteran suicide rates with non-veteran suicide rates.



The Total Number of Veteran Suicides from 2005 to 2017

To provide a reasonable basis for comparison between different populations, suicide numbers must be shown as a rate or number of suicides per 100,000 members of a specific population. These numbers, though not hard to grasp, can seem to minimize the extent of the problem. One way to see the full effect of the suicide problem

is to look at raw numbers. The following map shows the national total of suicides from 2005 to 2017 as well as the number of suicides by region. Remember that these numbers are not out of the U.S. adult population but out of the veteran population. The west region includes Hawaii and Alaska.



Our Veterans Are Suffering

What drives our veterans to suicide? According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, there is no single factor that contributes to a veteran’s decision to take his or her life. There are many factors that play a role in a veteran’s reaching the point of suicide, and they all appear to be shaped by culture.

When a Veteran Feels Useless

One lesson learned in the military is the emphasis on pulling your weight. You don’t want to be a burden. For those who cannot work or support themselves, that feeling of uselessness and of being a burden may become so strong that suicide is the only way to ease everyone’s pain.

Military Culture

From the moment that recruits enter basic training, they embark on a journey that is designed to change their old attitudes and ingrain new attitudes. Pride in one’s unit; sense of self-sacrifice; sense of unit cohesion; sense of purpose; sense of comradery. When a warfighter engages in combat, he or she experiences a life that no one but a fellow combatant could understand.

What Happens after Service?

When a service member separates, he or she may no longer feel special or feel a sense of belonging. Skills highly regarded and useful in the military may be less so in civilian life. The service member, once admired when on active duty, is relegated to a background role as a veteran. This is especially true for veterans who come back with physical imperfections resulting from combat injuries. Or they may suffer from less obvious emotional and mental injuries such as post traumatic stress disorder.

What Can We Do?

We can support the efforts of the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Veterans Health Administration as they provide services to our veterans. We can hold our elected officials accountable: when they send our volunteers to fight, they should provide the services that our veterans deserve when they return from service. In rural areas without easy access to service, we can demand that remote services be made available. The first year after separation from service is when the new veteran is most susceptible to taking his or her own life. When we ask so much of our volunteer forces, we should do everything we can to make sure they receive the services they deserve. Empty words and empty gestures are a disservice.

Sorces
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