NEW ORLEANS — Despite a high cancer mortality rate and claims that petrochemical companies create a “cancer alley” along the Mississippi River, Louisiana fares relatively well in one cancer gauge: the incidence rate among children.

A new publication of the Louisiana Tumor Registry program of the Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center, “Childhood Cancer in Louisiana, 1988-1996,” tracks cancer among state residents 14 and younger. The study found that, except for white girls, young people aren’t hit by cancer as often in Louisiana as they are elsewhere in the nation. White girls nearly matched the national rate.

Cancer in children is often thought to be more closely linked to genetics than to environmental or lifestyle factors, but no one understands why the incidence rate among young people in Louisiana is relatively low, said Dr. Vivien Chen, director of the Tumor Registry.

“This study actually is a first step for us to get to understand children a little bit more,” Chen said. “We really don’t know a lot about what causes cancer in general in children.”

Roughly 125 cancer cases are diagnosed among Louisiana children each year, or fewer than 1 percent of all cases reported in the state.

The most common forms of the disease reported during the nine-year period were leukemia, central nervous system malignancies, lymphomas, kidney tumors and cancer of soft tissue such as muscles.

Children in the youngest age group, 4 and younger, had the highest cancer incidence rate, and white children of any age are more likely than black children to face the disease, the study says.

The report coincides with an increase in the Tumor Registry’s status and responsibility. The National Cancer Institute has added the New Orleans-based program to a select network of agencies that collect data on cancer incidence and survival rates.

As a result, the Tumor Registry will play a bigger role in monitoring cancer across Louisiana, giving federal officials data on how the disease affects minorities or rural residents, officials said.

Inclusion in the Surveillance, Epidemiology and End Results Program will bring $3.1 million in federal grants over the next two years, the Health Sciences Center reported.

Dr. Mary Ella Sanders, interim chancellor of the LSU Health Sciences Center, said joining the national network has long been a goal.

“This is the most authoritative source regarding cancer incidence and survival in the country,” she said. “For us to be included, I think speaks to the level of excellence we are providing in terms of tumor registry for the state.”

The analysis of cancer among children is the latest in a series of statistical reports written by the Tumor Registry since 1995, when it was placed under the LSU Medical System’s control. The Louisiana Office of Public Health previously administered the registry, which gathers cancer data from hospitals, pathology laboratories and other health-care centers.