Study: La. AIDS patients lead nation in suicides

By The Associated Press

Louisianians with AIDS are more likely to kill themselves than the rest of the population, even when compared with people suffering other terminal diseases, a new study shows.

The research, in the November issue of the journal “Social Work,” shows the suicide rate for AIDS patients in Louisiana is 130 times higher than the general population.

AIDS patients in rural Louisiana are almost twice as likely to commit suicide than those patients living in the New Orleans area, the study found.

The information shows that mental-health professionals are not reaching the people who need them most: people who are plunged into emotional crises after learning they will die, probably at an early age, said Ronald J. Mancoske, an associate professor of social work at Southern University in New Orleans and the article’s lead author.

“We thought the rates were high,” he said. “They were higher than what we thought.”

Mancoske suggested several factors may explain the high rural suicide rate:

- Specialized care, such as psychological counseling, is difficult, if not impossible, to find there.
- There may be few gay and bisexual men, the people most likely to be afflicted with AIDS, and a feeling of isolation may result.
- Community sentiment toward AIDS and those who have the illness is likely to be much more hostile than one would find in cities.

“I just know that people in rural areas feel such desperation,” state epidemiologist Louise McFarland said.

“They think they have no one to turn to about this disease, and the stigma that many of them feel about this disease makes them worry about repercussions.”

Suicide rates among terminally ill people typically are higher than the suicide rate in the general population, researchers reported.

For instance, Mancoske said, the rate at which cancer patients kill themselves is believed thought to be 15 to 20 times that of the general population, and suicides related to Huntington’s chorea, the familial nervous-system disorder whose victims include folk singer Woody Guthrie, are as much as 23 times above that figure.

However, the highest rate they cited among people with serious illnesses, as much as 50 times above the norm among people with terminal kidney disease, was still far below the rate for people with AIDS.

While mental-health work does not treat the physical manifestations of AIDS, it can successfully treat psychological trauma associated with the disease, said Mancoske.

“We know we can help with psychological problems if a person is lonely and afraid,” he said. “We can help him understand what’s going on and deal with the future.”

New medical treatments for AIDS have lengthened patient’s lives, but have not yet offered hope of a cure, leaving patients with a life of potentially agonizing uncertainty.

“You’re always waiting for the other shoe to drop, and you know it’s going to,” said Susan Falcon, NO/AIDS Task Force’s director of client services. “I don’t think that’s quality of life.”

Mancoske conducted the research with Cynthia Martin Wadsworth, a social worker at Kingsley House in New Orleans; Joseph A. Hasney, a social worker with the state Office of Family Services’ Child Protection Service in Harvey; and Darlene S. Dugas, a hospice social worker in Florence, S.C.

The project, which covers 1987 through 1991, started with a computer search of all Louisiana death certificates.

On those documents where suicide was listed as the cause of death, the computer looked further for indications of AIDS, including infection with the virus that causes the disease and complications associated with the condition, such as Kaposi’s sarcoma and Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia. The computer work was performed by the state Office of Public Health.

From 1987 through 1991, the computer search found 51 suicides among Louisianians with AIDS, resulting in a rate of 175 suicides per 10,000 residents of the state, the report said.