

Mental illness up among Katrina survivors, study finds

BOSTON, Massachusetts (Reuters) -- Hurricane Katrina doubled the rate of serious mental illness in areas ravaged by the storm but the urge to commit suicide fell, partly because survivors bonded with each other, a Harvard-led study said Monday.

Billed as the biggest mental health study yet after Katrina killed about 1,500 people along the Gulf Coast, the survey showed that 15 percent of 1,043 survivors were found to have a serious mental illness five to eight months after the storm.

That figure suggests about 200,000 people from Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi face serious mental illness because of Katrina, with about a third suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome and the remainder depression, said Ronald Kessler, the study's lead researcher.

Nearly 85 percent of the survivors faced a major financial, income, or housing loss, and more than a third endured extreme physical adversity after Katrina struck a year ago and flooded 80 percent of New Orleans, the survey showed. Nearly 23 percent encountered extreme psychological adversity.

About 25 percent reported having nightmares about their experiences -- a figure that rises to nearly 50 percent for people who lived in New Orleans.

Stronger ties

But Kessler, a professor of health care policy at Harvard Medical School, said the number of people reporting a desire to kill themselves declined, in part because many survivors had forged stronger ties with loved ones and their community.

"We found an extraordinarily high proportion of our sample who said that despite the understandable sadness with all they lost and the understandable anxieties about the future ... that they felt closer to their loved ones, they felt connected to the community in a way they didn't before," he said.

"They felt much more religious, they felt that they had a purpose in their life and a meaning," he said, noting that 88.5 percent of the survivors in the survey said Katrina had helped them develop a deeper sense of meaning or purpose in life.

"Those are the people where these suicidal tendencies decreased," he said.

The study, led by the Harvard Medical School and funded by the National Institutes of Mental Health, was published in the World Health Organization's "Bulletin" newsletter.

The researchers compared their survey with a snapshot of mental health taken in same geographic area by the federal government in 2001-03. The researchers plan to interview the same 1,043 survivors over seven years to track their recovery.

The survey also showed that nearly 90 percent of the survivors had heard about the hurricane more than a day before it hit, and the majority at least three days in advance.

Among those who stayed behind, up to 42 percent did not evacuate because they did not want to go, while up to 46 percent said they were unable to leave. About 40 percent of low-income people said they were unable to leave against 6 percent of people with high incomes, it said.

A significant number of survivors may also leave their hurricane-battered homes, the survey showed. Nearly one in four people living in their pre-hurricane homes are considering relocating to another area.