

Suicides up locally, but so are survival instincts

By Bill Walsh
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WASHINGTON — While Hurricane Katrina took a toll on the mental health of people all along the Gulf Coast, a surprising new study suggests it might also have revealed an “inner strength” in the storm survivors.

A survey of 1,043 hurricane survivors from Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama found a higher rate of mental illness after last year’s storm. But it also detected fewer suicidal tendencies even among those in distress, which researchers attribute to a newfound sense of purpose, religious faith and renewed ties to family brought to the surface by the disaster.

“A great many survivors of Katrina are, understandably, depressed by their losses and anxious about their future,” four academic researchers wrote in a paper published in the Bulletin of World Health Organization. “However, the suicidality often associated with those syndromes in the general population is much lower among people in the post-Katrina sample who were able to develop a belief in their ability to rebuild their life and a perception of inner strength in the wake of the hurricane.”

The findings echoed those of other post-disaster surveys as well as a 1999 study of mental illness after the first Lebanon-Israel war. That study found a higher rate of depression in Beirut than any of the nine other cities in the survey but a lower rate of suicide.

Statistics in post-Katrina Louisiana also would seem to follow that pattern — at least after the initial shock wore off. Recent rates of suicide in Orleans and Jefferson parishes, both declared disaster areas last year, are about the same or lower than they were before Hurricane Katrina struck last Aug. 29.

But Dr. Jeff Rouse, a psychiatrist employed by Orleans Parish government, said the data may skew the picture of the mental health among Katrina survivors. He said that in the four months following the storm, which prompted the evacuation of more than 1 million people and flooded more than 200,000 homes in southeastern Louisiana, suicide rates in New Orleans tripled.

“I think that people have made choices about coming back to the city and if they think they can’t handle it, they have left,” Rouse said. “Maybe some people have gotten better or they have gotten used to the new normal.”

Rouse was skeptical that the findings across three Gulf Coast states, which sustained varying degrees of hurricane damage, would hold up if the study had focused on Orleans Parish, one of the hardest hit areas. Ronald Kessler, a Harvard epidemiologist who led the study, said that the findings in New Orleans were the same as those in other parts of the disaster zone.

Kessler said that high suicide rates in the months after the storm aren’t inconsistent with the finds from his survey.

“It might be that the number of people thinking about suicide has gone down but those who are thinking about it are much more likely to act than before,” Kessler said.

The study was possible because Kessler and his team had been interviewing people in the region about their mental health before the storm. After Katrina struck, researchers from Harvard, Virginia Tech and the University of Michigan interviewed people from the hurricane zone in

person and on the phone and asked them the same questions about depression and suicide, providing a pre- and post-Katrina snapshot of the mental health of similar populations.

They found that 11.3 percent of people suffered from “serious mental illness” after the storm, twice what it was before. Nearly 20 percent suffered from mild-to-moderate mental illness, also double the pre-Katrina rate.

Yet among those suffering post-disaster psychological distress, the prevalence of what the study called “suicide ideation,” which includes suicidal thoughts and attempts, was dramatically lower: .7 percent versus 8.4 percent before Katrina.

It turned out that while Katrina wrought extensive damage, for some it also stirred unexpected feelings of hope. Nearly 82 percent of those surveyed said they felt closer to loved ones after the storm, 96 percent reported feeling a renewed faith in their own abilities, 67 percent said they were more spiritual or religious and 75 percent found “a deeper meaning and purpose in life.”

One explanation may be found in the sheer scope of the storm and the subsequent damage. While some suffered more than others in what is the most expensive disaster in U.S. history, hardly anyone escaped unscathed. That could be an important factor in measuring the ability of survivors to fend off thoughts of suicide, according to Paula Clayton, a psychiatrist with the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.

“There was a social cohesion after Katrina,” Clayton said. “Everyone was in this together. There was no aloneness here. If you talk to people who are depressed and suicidal, they feel totally isolated even though they have people around them.”

The study will continue to track hurricane victims over several years to evaluate their ongoing mental health and the effectiveness of recovery efforts.

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