

NY TIMES
December 27, 2005
Mental Health

Hurricane Takes a Further Toll: Suicides Up in New Orleans

By ADAM NOSSITER

NEW ORLEANS, Dec. 26 - [Mental health](#) professionals say this city appears to be experiencing a sharp increase in [suicides](#) in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, and interviews and statistics suggest that the rate is now double or more the national and local averages.

At least seven people have killed themselves in the four months since the storm, officials say, here in a city whose population is now no more than 75,000 to 100,000. That compares with a national rate of 11 suicides per 100,000 for all of 2002, and a rate in New Orleans of about nine per 100,000 for all of 2004. There is broad agreement that the problem is likely to get worse.

Stevenson Palfi, 53, a well-known local filmmaker, was apparently the latest to take his own life. Mr. Palfi's house in the Mid-City section had taken eight feet of water, and he was in despair over losing years of files and photographs, a computer - in fact, all the contents of his office.

The aftermath of the storm pushed him "right off the cliff emotionally," said a friend, Mary Katherine Aldin.

"This just hit him so hard," she said. "It was a cumulative devastation to him emotionally."

Mr. Palfi sat down to write a suicide note and a will, then shot himself on the second floor of his Banks Street home in the early hours of Dec. 14, Ms. Aldin said.

The signs of despair are pervasive here: a woman, having returned to see her flooded-out house for the first time, runs screaming down Mirabeau Avenue in the Gentilly neighborhood, where the police find her babbling uncontrollably; in a Bourbon Street nightclub, a man draws a gun and shoots himself in the head, even as dancers sway to the music; from half-ruined houses, the police retrieve homeowners, weeping and distraught; psychiatrists report that previously stable patients are now preoccupied with death and suicide.

"I would call the scope of this disaster, the scale of mental health problems, unprecedented," said Charles G. Curie, the mental health administrator at the federal Department of Health and Human Services.

Officials say that among those who have killed themselves was Dr. James Kent Treadway, a pediatrician who was a fixture in the Uptown neighborhood. Dr. Treadway, 58, committed suicide in his partly destroyed house on Nov. 16.

"He's got no practice, the house is flooded, his office was destroyed," said his brother-in-law, Michael Caire. "He just doesn't know how he's going to make it in the future."

Officials have also reported suicides among evacuees in cities like Houston, where large numbers of them have settled.

And in addition to those who have killed themselves here, about two dozen have tried to do so, a rate that is most likely, officials say, also far higher than normal.

Jeff Wellborn, administrator of the Police Department's mobile mental health squad, said members of his unit were being called in frequently when a homeowner, witnessing the extent of losses for the first time, broke down.

"They're coming into town, and they get so depressed they can't handle it anymore," Mr. Wellborn said. "Most of the time they are crying."

"These are not the same people we dealt with before the storm," he said. "They had no mental health history. We are seeing almost exclusively new patients."

Health professionals confronting this tide of despondency view it as one more sign that New Orleans, with its miles of ruined neighborhoods, moribund downtown and enclaves of semi-normality, is far from recovered. Nobody here can escape the persistent evidence of the city's devastation. First exchanges are often about how much damage your house has suffered, or whether your house still exists.

"There are a lot of people walking around with an endemic low-grade [depression](#)," said Dale F. Firestone, a local psychotherapist.

For an undetermined number, it is worse, experts said.

"I've had some very depressed people from Katrina," said Dr. Douglas W. Greve, a psychiatrist with a practice in the French Quarter. "These are profound depressions. In the past I would have hospitalized these patients."

"I'm beginning to get experiences with acute anxiety," Dr. Greve said. "Anxiety and depression, abuse of alcohol, that's gone way up." A handful of his patients have been suicidal, he said, adding, "I think it's going to get worse."

Children, too, are suffering, said Dr. Douglas S. Pool, a psychiatrist who treats the young.

"You actually get kids as young as 5 talk about not wanting to live, wanting to die," Dr. Pool said.

Dr. Denise L. Dorsey, president-elect of the New Orleans Psychoanalytic Center, said that for many, the devastation was beyond an ability to cope.

"Looking down a street where it's house after house, and the garbage and the innards of the houses, there's something about it that people in general can't grasp," Dr. Dorsey said. "It's not within the realm of any experience anyone's ever had. Your ordinary American doesn't have that in their repertoire of experience."