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## Suicides likely down in Tuscaloosa County

**2012 saw downturn after recent increase, numbers suggest**

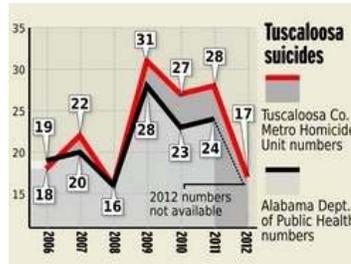
By Stephanie Taylor

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Researchers have been paying close attention to the suicide rates in the areas of Alabama affected by the 2011 tornado outbreak.

It appears that the suicide numbers in Tuscaloosa County have gone down after an upturn in recent years.



Staff graphic | Anthony Bratina

The Alabama Department of Public Health compiles statistics from death certificate records and the Tuscaloosa County Metro Homicide Unit notes every suicide investigators respond to. The numbers vary slightly, and ADPH doesn't have numbers from 2012 yet. But numbers compiled by the local unit indicate that the number could be down.

Suicide rates have spiked across the country since the recession began in 2008, Alabama's problem has been worse than average.

Statistics indicate there were about 13.4 suicides per 100,000 people in 2011 in Alabama, while the most recent national numbers had the overall American suicide rate at 12.4 per 100,000 people.

The Alabama Department of Public Health reported 24 suicides in Tuscaloosa County in 2011, and are awaiting 2012 totals. The homicide unit reported 28 in 2011 and 17 in 2012. Investigators were concerned in 2012, as the number approached the record high of 31 in 2008.

Natural disasters can often trigger post-traumatic stress disorder that can lead to suicide, said Dr. Debra Hodges, suicide prevention director for the Department of Public Health.

"There has been great concern among researchers that the 2011 tornadoes would cause the rates in affected areas to increase," she said. Increases following a disaster usually begin about six months to a year later, she said.

She noted that three hurricanes hit the Gulf Coast in 2004 and 2005. Ivan had no real effect on the suicide rate, she said, but Katrina and Rita did. After a year and a half, the rates dropped again.

"But what happens then — the economic crisis — and the rate climbs even higher. The 2009 rate is 33 percent higher than the 10-year average of 1999-2008," she said.

A crisis center in Mobile reported to Hodges that their call volume doubled between 2009 and 2010 and was up in 2011. The Gulf oil spill led to home foreclosures, job losses and the failure of generations-long family businesses.

Suicides typically rise when the economy goes down, especially among men.

“The highest rates of suicides ever known happened during the Great Depression,” Hodges said. “The rate is higher among men. Men tend to invest their whole lives in what they do, and it becomes their identity. If they lose their jobs, it can be devastating.”

All but one of the 17 suicides recorded last year by the Tuscaloosa County Metro Homicide Unit were men, said Tuscaloosa County Metro Homicide Unit commander Capt. Loyd Baker.

Fifteen of the 17 people used a gun to commit suicide, which Hodges says is more common in rural than urban areas. The other two died by hanging.

Nationwide in 2010, about 50 percent of people used guns in suicides, she said. In Alabama, the number was higher than 70 percent.

“Guns are more easily available. People in rural areas may have them to protect livestock from predators on their land or because they hunt,” she said.

Less access to health and mental health care is another factor that leads to higher suicide rates in rural areas, she said.

The Alabama Suicide Prevention and Resources Coalition is planning a campaign that will begin in June which aims to lessen any stigma attached to talking about suicide.

The campaign will be funded with a \$1.47 million, three-year grant that will focus resources toward youth suicide prevention.

Television commercials will run and the Alabama Suicide Prevention and Resources Coalition will offer what’s called “gatekeeper training” for adults who often interact with young people. Teachers, coaches school staff, youth ministers and others will receive training to recognize warning signs for suicide, how to respond and who to contact.

“I think this is going to be really helpful and an enormous public service,” Hodges said.

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