

## Midlife crisis: Suicide rate spikes in 45-54 age category

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For 14 years Jane watched as her live-in boyfriend struggled with depression.

Last fall at the age of 48, he hanged himself in their bedroom.

"He didn't want help. He was miserable," Jane, who asked that her real name not be used, said. "I didn't know how to help him because if you pushed him, he would just get up and leave."

Typically thought of as the result of impulsive actions by troubled adolescents and teens, suicide is on the rise among middle-aged people, mental health experts say.

A recent analysis of suicide statistics from 1999 to 2004 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention showed a nearly 20 percent increase in suicide rates among 45- to 54-year-olds. Changes among other age groups were less significant.

Determining why thousands of people choose to take their own lives each year is often unsuccessful because the data is compiled using death certificates, which provide limited details.

"While it (the study) will tell us about suicide, it will oftentimes not tell us about the risk factors," Alex Crosby, epidemiologist in the CDC Injury Center's Division of Violence Prevention, said.

Analysis of data provided by the coroner's offices of Kankakee, Iroquois, Grundy, Livingston and Will counties showed suicide rates of middle-aged residents reflect the national increase. People in their 40s and 50s had the greatest combined average suicide rate between 1999 and 2006, with the highest numbers in the last four years.

In Kankakee County, for instance, middle-aged people committed nearly 60 percent of the seven suicides in the last 13 months, according to data supplied by the county coroner's office.

Traditionally, suicide prevention programs have been aimed at teens and the elderly, another group vulnerable to depression.



**Photo: Nicholas Holstein**

Jackie Haas, President/CEO of the Helen Wheeler Center in Kankakee, works on an application for a grant in her office on Thursday. Haas attributes the higher number of suicides to substance abuse, untreated mental illness and the economy. [More photos from this shoot](#)

But Janice Hurtado Aeppli, central division director of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, said the CDC's report is also a stark reality among the middle-aged sector.

"This is an underserved population when it comes to suicide prevention," Aeppli said.

To address the problem, the Illinois Chapter of the AFSP is planning to evaluate its education program to better target middle-aged Americans.

#### Alarming local trend

While Illinois ranks low compared to other states' suicide rates -- coming in at number 43 with an average rate of 8.5 per 100,000 people from 2001 to 2005 -- both Iroquois and Kankakee counties have significantly higher rates, at 13.7 and 10.6, respectively.

Will County, which has a population about five times greater than Kankakee County, had a rate comparable to the state's rate.

Jackie Haas, president and CEO of the Helen Wheeler Center for Community Mental Health in Kankakee, attributes the higher numbers to substance abuse, untreated mental illness and a struggling economy. With the amount of stress middle-aged people are under, Haas said growing suicide numbers are not surprising.

"That population is pretty wrapped up in work and families," Haas said. "If that person doesn't get help dealing with those feelings, then it just kind of snowballs."

#### Pressures push women

Everyday pressures can be especially trying on women who serve as primary caregivers in families. Women 45 to 54 saw a 31 percent increase in suicides, according to the five-year CDC analysis.

"It's a continual drive to be all things to all people that leaves women in a vulnerable situation," said Dr. Nancy O'Reilly, clinical psychologist and founder of womenspeak.com, a resource focused on women's issues.

Women are twice as likely as men to suffer from depression and face more pressures than ever while growing older in a media-driven society focused on youthful beauty. O'Reilly said women need to put a higher priority on their own needs and be realistic about how much they can give to others.

"We need to take the Superwoman shirt off and say, 'Today I'm not going to fly; I'm going to sit,' " O'Reilly said.