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50 CENTS

RISKY BEHAVIOR

Study: Hispanic teens put health on the line more

STAFF AND WIRE REPORTS

ATLANTA — Hispanic high school students use drugs and attempt suicide at far higher rates than their white and black classmates, says a new federal survey that has the experts somewhat perplexed.

More than 11 percent of all Latino students — and 15 percent of Latino girls — said they had attempted suicide, according to the report issued this week by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The white and black rates were about 7.5 percent.

While specific data for Illinois was not available, mental health professionals in the Aurora area said Latino girls make up a large percentage of the teenagers they counsel about depression or suicide.

Kari Evans, prevention specialist at Suicide Prevention Services, based in Batavia, said 80 percent of the students receiving counseling through their programs at East Aurora High

◆ Turn to **HISPANIC, A2**

HISPANIC

From page A1

School are Latino, and 70 percent are female. Evans noted those numbers generally correlate with the overall population of the school.

The local Association for Individual Development's crisis intervention team saw 350 people under age 21 in southern Kane and Kendall counties in the last year. Of them, 31 percent were Latino, 45 percent were white, and 23 percent were black, said Eric Ward, director of outpatient behavioral health and crisis services. Ward said 57 percent of those Latinos were female.

The AID mobile crisis intervention team responds to psychiatric crisis in hospital emergency rooms, homeless shelters, social-service agencies, and any public location or home.

Ward said the intervention team has seen a 40 percent increase since last year in the amount of children and adolescents it serves. He attributes the increase to a lack of outpatient mental health services in Aurora as well as increased awareness in the community about suicide prevention.

In the national study, Latinos also reported much higher rates of using cocaine, heroin, ecstasy and methamphetamines; their use of condoms was at lower rates than the other population groups.

"We really don't understand this phenomenon as well as we should," said Dr. Glenn Flores of the Medical College of Wisconsin, who spoke at a CDC news conference.

Seat-belt use improves

The CDC survey of nearly 14,000 U.S. high school students has been conducted every other year, since 1991. Results reported Thursday were from last year's survey.

Questionnaires go to students in grades 9-12 in public and private high schools in all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

The report contained some good news. Only 10 percent of high school students overall said they never or rarely wore a seat belt while riding in a car, down from 18 percent in 2003.

But the percentage of students who said they had smoked in the last month rose slightly — 23 percent, up from about 22 percent in 2003. Also, there was no decline in the percentage of students who said they'd had sexual intercourse, which held steady at 47 percent, or in the percentage of sexually active students who said they'd used a condom, which was 63 percent.

However, it's the first time in 14 years that condom use among sexually active high school students has not risen, noted Martha Kempner, spokeswoman for the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, a New York-based non-profit group.

Black students reported the most sexual activity, the most TV-watching and the highest use of video or computer games. White kids were the most frequent smokers and heavy drinkers and were worst about eating enough fruits and vegetables.

Beacon News staff writer Angela Fornelli and the Associated Press contributed to this story.