Drop in corner drugstores
a bitter pill for poor areas

By MICHAEL LASALANDRA

Massachusetts has one-quarter fewer pharmacies today than it did 16 years ago, and some of the state's poorest areas are making do with just half the drug stores they once had, a study says.

The study, by Boston University health care analysts Alan Sager and Deborah Socar, shows that areas populated primarily by minorities have been hardest hit.

Neighborhoods in which minorities made up more than 80 percent of the population have 50 percent fewer pharmacies.

"The pharmacies are being choked," Sager said.

So are the patients who depend on them, he noted.

"An older person who has trouble getting around can face a tough time if the neighborhood pharmacy closes," he said.

Many of the pharmacies that have closed are mom-and-pop operations. Some have been forced out by large chain stores. Others have lost out to changing health care economics.

Norman Kinan, owner of Crawford Drug in Dorchester, is one of a dwindling number of mom-and-pop pharmacies.

"It's not easy, but we're hanging in there," he said.

Kinan, in business near Fields Corner for 35 years, says he stays open by providing personal service.

"We have our own loyal customers who have been coming to us for years," he said. "We still deliver. Just today, I picked up a prescription at a customer's house a mile away. She had just gotten out of the hospital. I took it back to the store, filled it and brought it back to her. The chains won't provide that kind of service."

Arlene Pasquine, the 63-year-old patient who received Kinan's delivery, said she depends on her druggist.

"Every time I call, he always brings me up what I need," she said. "He's done it three or four times. He's been very good to me."

Sager said pharmacies are making less money per prescription because of tough managed care contracts.

At the same time, residents of poor neighborhoods, who are less likely to have insurance, don't get discounts negotiated by the HMOs. As a result, they can't afford the drugs they need, Sager said.

"That's another reason why some of these pharmacies may be going out of business," he said. "The purchasing power isn't there."

At the same time, fewer pharmacies mean less competition — and higher prices for customers.

The study showed that the cities of Boston, Lawrence, New Bedford, Pittsfield, Springfield and Worcester had 41 percent fewer pharmacies in 1995 than they did 15 years earlier.

DYING BREED: Pharmacist Norman Kinan, who runs a Dorchester drugstore, is one of a dwindling number of local druggists. Staff photo by Nancy Lane