

# No place like home: Katrina's lasting impact

April 20 2008

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New Orleans residents who lost their homes in Hurricane Katrina were over five times more likely to experience serious psychological distress a year after the disaster than those who did not. That is one of the findings from a study presented at the annual meeting of the Population Association of America in New Orleans.

The study, conducted by University of Michigan researcher Narayan Sastry and Tulane University's Mark VanLandingham, examines the mental health status of pre-Katrina residents of the City of New Orleans in the fall of 2006---one year after the hurricane. It also describes and analyzes disparities in mental health by race, education and income.

Based on a pilot survey that drew a stratified, area-based probability sample of pre-Katrina dwellings in the city, the study is one of the first to provide data representative of the pre-hurricane population. It was designed by the RAND Corporation, a nonprofit research organization.

A total of 144 individuals participated in the pilot study, including many who moved away from the area after the disaster and had not returned a year later. More than half the study participants were black, nearly two-thirds had a high school diploma or less education, and nearly 60 percent were unmarried. Nearly three-fourths were employed in the month before the hurricane hit.

According to Sastry, who is affiliated with RAND and with the U-M Institute for Social Research (ISR), about 60 percent of study participants had no psychological distress at the time of the interview,

while about 20 percent had mild-to-moderate mental illness and another 20 percent had serious mental illness.

To assess mental illness, respondents were asked a series of questions from a widely used measure of general psychological distress. How often during the past 30 days, they were asked, did you feel nervous, hopeless, restless or fidgety, depressed, that everything was an effort, and worthless"

Blacks reported substantially higher rates of serious psychological distress than whites, Sastry and Van Landingham reported. Almost one-third of blacks were found to have a high degree of distress, compared to just six percent of whites. Those with higher incomes and more education were much less likely to experience serious psychological distress, and those born in Louisiana were much more likely to have serious distress.

The researchers also examined how the extent of housing damage was related to psychological distress a year after the disaster. They found that those who lost their homes were five times more likely than those who did not to have serious psychological distress. In all, about 66 percent of the respondents reported that their homes were badly damaged or unlivable.

"Our findings suggest that severe damage to one's home is a particularly important factor behind socioeconomic disparities in psychological distress, and possibly behind the levels of psychological distress," Sastry said. "These effects may be partly economic, because, for most families who own their home, home equity is the largest element of household wealth.

"Apart from the financial losses, severely damaged or destroyed housing may prevent people who want to return to New Orleans from doing so

because they lack a place to live. This affects their social ties, their employment, and many other factors.

"The magnitude and permanence of a housing loss suggests that for many people, the psychological consequences of this experience could be profound and lasting."

Sastry and VanLandingham emphasize that these findings are preliminary, and that a larger study is now being planned.

Source: University of Michigan

Citation: No place like home: Katrina's lasting impact (2008, April 20) retrieved 18 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2008-04-home-katrina-impact.html>

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