

'Legacy of Katrina' report details impact of stalled recovery on mental health status of children

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Five years ago Hurricane Katrina and the flooding of New Orleans caused the evacuation of 1.5 million Gulf Coast residents. After a year, 500,000 people remained displaced, many residing in highly transitional shelters, including the notorious FEMA trailer parks.

Now at the five-year mark, substantial consequences from this prolonged displacement have resulted in widespread [mental health issues](#) in [children](#) living in the region, according to a new study by the National Center for Disaster Preparedness (NCDP) at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health and a related white paper from the Children's Health Fund (CHF). Together, these documents indicate that although considerable progress has been made in rebuilding the local economy and infrastructure, there is still an alarming level of [psychological distress](#) and housing instability. Investigators believe that housing and community instability and the uncertainty of recovery undermine family resilience and the [emotional health](#) of children. These factors characterize what researchers are calling a failed recovery for the Gulf region's most vulnerable population: economically disadvantaged children whose families remain displaced.

The CHF report, "Legacy of Katrina: The Impact of a Flawed Recovery on Vulnerable Children of the Gulf Coast," expands upon on a study by NCDP researchers, who have followed a cohort of more than 1,000 families affected by Katrina and the ensuing disruption. According to

the Gulf Coast Child & Family Health Study, funded by the Children's Health Fund and published in the current issue of American Medical Association's *Journal of Disaster Management and Public Health Preparedness*, the widespread mental health problems still experience by Gulf Coast children serve as a barometer for the failed recovery of their families and their communities. Over one-third of the children in displaced families have been clinically diagnosed with at least one mental health problem since Katrina—with behavioral and conduct disorders the most common of these problems. Yet fewer than 50% of parents seeking needed mental health counseling for their children were able to access professional services. Furthermore, nearly half of the households in the study were still living in unstable conditions and, five years later, 60% of respondents still report their situation as being unstable or worse than it was before Katrina.

"This study points to a major crisis facing the children of the post-Katrina Gulf Region," says Irwin Redlener, M.D., director of the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia's Mailman School of Public Health and president of the Children's Health Fund. "From the perspective of the Gulf's most vulnerable children and families, the recovery from Katrina and the flooding of New Orleans has been a dismal failure."

"Previous studies have demonstrated a significant increase in the prevalence of anxiety, depression and posttraumatic stress disorder following [Hurricane Katrina](#), as well as a rise in violence and suicide," said Italo Subbarao D.O., MBA, deputy editor of AMA's Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness journal. "This study adds further credence to widely accepted views that adults and children affected by catastrophic emergencies can experience up to a 40 percent increased in mental and behavioral illness."

According to David M. Abramson, Ph.D., MPH, director of research at

the NCDP and senior author of the study which looked at the roles of parents and communities in children's recovery, "Children are completely dependent upon others in their lives to provide the security and stability that will help them recover. This suggests that the many support systems in children's lives - their parents, their communities, and their schools - are not yet functioning properly. The slow recovery of children's mental health in Gulf Coast populations is a bellwether indicator of how well the region is recovering."

Additional key findings:

- Even as long as four and a half years after the event, about 45% of parents report that their children are experiencing emotional or psychological problems that they hadn't experienced prior to Katrina.
- Children post-Katrina are 4.5 times more likely to have serious emotional disturbance than pre-Katrina. For the purposes of this study, such disturbances were defined as emotional issues, hyperactivity, conduct and problems relating to peers.
- Nearly half of people who had been displaced for over a year by Katrina are still living in unstable conditions.

The study findings are supported by clinical data from the Children's Health Fund, which provides mobile clinics that travel to underserved areas in the Gulf Coast to provide care for families and children. In the period of June 2009 through June 2010, despite improvement in housing conditions in Louisiana, psychiatric, developmental or learning-related disorders in children were diagnosed as frequently as respiratory illness. And in New Orleans alone, approximately 30,000 school children were not able to return to public school. However, data also shows that

children who were relocated sooner did better in school than students with longer periods of displacement and those who were enrolled in higher performing schools did the best, thus highlighting the importance of social systems in a child's post-disaster recovery.

Both the study and the clinical reports from the Children's Health Fund's Gulf Coast pediatric programs paint a clear picture of how insufficient government response and recovery efforts continue to take a toll on children's welfare, especially those who are the most underserved. Dr. Redlener, a pediatrician and professor at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health, outlined a number of implications for policymakers and others: "Affected families need urgent assistance to return to a state of 'normalcy' characterized by safe communities and stable housing. Nearly two out of three children affected by Katrina continue to experience serious mental and behavioral problems or the stress of unstable housing or both, with children living in poverty over two times as susceptible to serious emotional disorders. We believe that this represents at least 20,000 children affected by Katrina—and perhaps considerably more. Immediate action needs to be taken to increase mental health services in the region."

Dr. Redlener continues, "And it's not just clinical services that are needed by these marginalized families. Every effort must be made to rapidly bring back a 'state of normalcy', that is, stable safe housing for every family in communities with appropriate access to essential services and economic stability."

The Gulf Coast Child & Family Health Study has collected [mental health](#) data in the Gulf Coast since January 2006 and covers a random sample of 1,079 households in Louisiana and Mississippi, including 427 children. Face-to-face interviews were conducted by trained interviewers, and the key outcome variable was Serious Emotional Disturbance, based upon the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire

(SDQ), a widely validated diagnostic screener. The data were collected in four waves over the course of four years with the majority of data for this analysis drawn from the fourth round of data, collected through March 2010.

Provided by Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health

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