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Bill Haber/Associated Press

Seventeen months after Hurricane Katrina, places like Pass Christian, Miss., still rely on temporary buildings, and many of the region's poorest people are finding little relief from mental health and money problems.

## Little Progress Seen for Poorest After Hurricane

By SHAILA DEWAN

ATLANTA, Feb. 1 — The recovery from Hurricane Katrina has stagnated for the poorest families displaced by the storm, a new study shows. Many still suffer from a significant loss of income, a higher-than-normal rate of chronic diseases like hypertension and an exponential rise in mental health problems among children.

The study, conducted in the Gulf Coast region of Mississippi a year after the storm by the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University and the Children's Health Fund, showed no improvement since a survey in Louisiana six months earlier.

Among the new study's findings are that more than a third of working families earning less than \$20,000 a year before the storm have not regained their previous income level; almost twice as many families are dependent on public assistance; and diagnoses of depression and anxiety among children have increased fourfold.

School absenteeism remains high, with more than a third of children missing 10 or more days of class in April, May or June of 2006. Families with specific needs like food or household items found help far more easily than those who needed legal help, child care or mental health care.

Among adults, the rate of hyper-

tension diagnoses increased by more than a third after the storm in August 2005, and more than 44 percent of parents or guardians tested "very low" on a basic mental health test. About 13 percent said they were coping "not very well or not at all" with the daily demands of parenting, significantly higher than the 1.5 percent who chose that answer in the 2003 National Survey of Children's Health, which the researchers used as a benchmark.

Nearly 40 percent of the respondents said they had been working before the storm but were now unemployed.

Dr. Irwin Redlener, the director of the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at the Mailman school and co-founder of the Children's Health Fund, said the survey results showed a lack of leadership in a relief effort marked by scattershot private efforts that resulted in an uneven distribution of help. For example, he said, the Children's Health Fund runs three mobile clinics, far from enough to meet the need.

"It's not a lack of money," Dr. Redlener said. "It's a lack of structure; it's a lack of distribution of the resources. We have a completely dysfunctional distribution system, and a great deal of bureaucracy."

The survey was conducted in face-to-face interviews with families living in private trailer parks, in Federal Emergency Management Agency trailer parks, or on their own

property, usually in trailers provided by FEMA. The FEMA park residents, who are often isolated by lack of transportation, were the poorest and least financially stable, and the most likely to view their environment as dangerous.

"For all practical purposes, these FEMA trailer parks are in fact internal refugee camps," Dr. Redlener said. "Families are mired in these horrendous conditions with no sense of when this is going to be over, either in the minds of the families or in the officials responsible for them."

David Abramson, the study's principal investigator, identified what he called the "poverty penalty," pointing out that the working poor were far more likely to have lost income since the storm. More than half of those who made less than \$10,000 a year in wages or salaries lost that income, compared with 15 percent of those who made \$35,000 or more before the storm. Half of those living in FEMA trailer parks had a bank account, and 16 percent had a usable credit card, according to the study.

There were significant differences between the people studied in Mississippi and those in Louisiana. In the new study, 43 percent of the respondents were Mississippi natives, compared to more than 80 percent of the Louisianians. In the FEMA trailer sites in Mississippi, just under half those surveyed were black, compared with nearly 80 percent in Louisiana trailer parks.