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By Mario Tama, Getty Images

Temporary housing for hurricane victims: Children walk home in a FEMA trailer park May 22 in Port Sulphur, La.

Hurricane kids battle ailments

Displaced children have trouble with anemia, allergies

By Rick Jervis
USA TODAY

NEW ORLEANS — Children of displaced families from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita have serious health and mental ailments, a new study says.

The report, released today by the New York City-based Children's Health Fund, reviewed

medical records of 261 children who lived in a federally funded Baton Rouge trailer park until early summer. It is the first in-depth review of children's medical and mental health after the catastrophic storms in 2005 that displaced thousands of families throughout the Gulf Coast.

After Katrina, the Children's Health Fund, a non-profit group that provides health care to children, dispatched mobile clinics across the Gulf Coast, including one outside Renaissance Village in Baton Rouge, then the largest Federal Emergency Management Agency trailer park in the region. The Children's Health Fund used medical data gathered from that clinic to conduct the survey, says Irwin Redlener, president of the group and the study's author.

One of the most alarming findings: 41% of children younger than 4 were diagnosed with iron-deficiency anemia, more than double the rate of children living

in New York City homeless shelters, Redlener says. "This is a very big problem that has not been focused on at all in the Gulf Coast," Redlener says.

Other findings:

► 55% of elementary-school-age children had a behavior or learning problem.

► 42% of children were diagnosed with allergic rhinitis, known as hay fever, and/or upper respiratory infection.

► 24% had a cluster of upper respiratory, allergic and skin ailments.

Heidi Sinclair, a Baton Rouge pediatrician who helped run the Children's Health Fund clinic there, says she saw disturbingly high rates of respiratory problems and skin rashes among children. She said that when she began testing for iron deficiency — a condition that can lead to fatigue, attention-deficit disorder and skin ailments — she thought the machines used to test were malfunctioning because the rates were so consistently high.

"The main problem is there's been such a lack of stability," Sinclair says.

This year, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said it would launch a long-term study of children who resided in federally issued trailers and mobile homes in Louisiana and Mississippi, hundreds of which were found to have high levels of toxins, such as formaldehyde.

Renaissance Village was emptied this summer, and the children and their families relocated to permanent or other temporary housing. There are still at least 9,300 families in trailers and 1,600 in hotel rooms across the Gulf Coast, according to FEMA.

The children in the Children's Health Fund study are probably some of the sickest of the estimated 30,000 children living in trailers and temporary housing in the region, Redlener says. Many other displaced children could experience similar symptoms, he says.

"This is the first wave of data, and it's extremely alarming," he says. "Who knows what's happening to kids we're not seeing?"

**WATER
MARK**
Tracking recovery
on the Gulf Coast

Corrections & Clarifications

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A story Friday on a South Dakota trial should have said the Hells Angels motorcycle gang has 2,000 to 2,500 members in more than 230 chapters worldwide, not nationwide.