

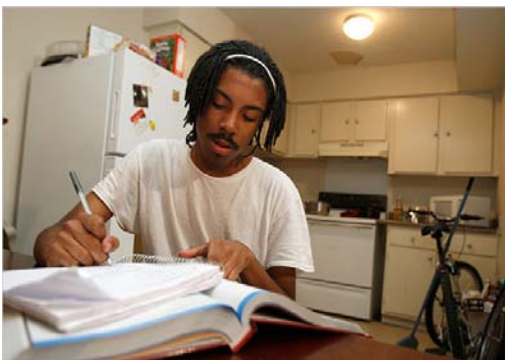
# The New York Times

New York, Friday, December 5, 2008

## Many Children Lack Stability Long After Storm

By SHAILA DEWAN

BATON ROUGE, La. — Last January, at the age of 15, Jermaine Howard stopped going to school. Attendance seemed pointless: Jermaine, living with his father and brother in the evacuee trailer park known as Renaissance Village since Hurricane Katrina in 2005, had not managed to earn a single credit in more than two years.



Tim Mueller for The New York Times

*Jermaine Howard, who lives with his family in Baton Rouge, La., struggles in school and has not earned credits in two years.*



Lori Waselchuk for The New York Times

*Alton Love and his daughter, Adrian, 9, who is adjusting well since Hurricane Katrina.*

Not that anyone took much notice. After Jermaine flunked out of seventh grade, the East Baton Rouge School District allowed him to skip eighth grade altogether and begin high school. After three semesters of erratic attendance, he left Baton Rouge in early spring of this year and moved in with another family in a suburb of New Orleans, where he found a job at a Dairy Queen.

A shy, artistic boy with a new mustache, Jermaine is one of tens of thousands of youngsters who lost not just all of their belongings to Hurricane Katrina, but a chunk of childhood itself.

After more than three years of nomadic uncertainty, many of the children of Hurricane Katrina are behind in school, acting out and suffering from extraordinarily high rates of illness and mental health problems. Their parents, many still anxious or depressed themselves, are struggling to keep the lights on and the refrigerator stocked.

For some, like Kearra Keys, 16, who was expelled from her Baton Rouge school for fighting and is now on a waiting list for a G.E.D. program, what was lost may be irretrievable. For others, like Roy Hilton, who stands a head taller than his third-grade classmates, recovery may lie in the neighborhood school near the New Orleans duplex where his family has finally found a home.

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The families profiled in this series were among the last to leave Renaissance Village when the Federal Emergency Management Agency closed it in May. The government was trying to nudge the poorest, least-educated and sickest evacuees toward self-sufficiency — or at least toward agencies other than FEMA.

More than 30,000 former trailer residents landed in apartments paid for by the federal government until March 2009, a small fraction are in the hands of private charities or government housing programs for the disabled, and thousands more simply traded in their trailers for other temporary quarters. Case managers promised by FEMA to help these families find permanent homes have yet to start work in Louisiana.

Many of the adults are at least partly victims of their own poor choices. But the children are another matter. For them, the experts prescribe the one thing that has been hardest to obtain: stability. Their parents sometimes work against that goal.

Jermaine's father, Joseph Griffin, has had trouble holding on to steady work and said he did not see much value in his son's attending school this semester because he had already missed so much class. "If he doesn't get no credits for it, what sense does it make for him to sit up in there?" Mr. Griffin said. "I was going to try to get him a job."

The health problems of Hurricane Katrina children are daunting. When the **Children's Health Fund**, whose mobile health clinics have provided the only doctors and psychologists available to many of these families, reviewed the charts of children seen this year, researchers with the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University found that 41 percent under age 4 had iron-deficiency anemia — twice the rate for children in New York City's homeless shelters. Anemia, often attributable to poor nutrition, is associated with developmental problems and academic underachievement.

Forty-two percent of the children, who lived in trailers laced with dangerous levels of formaldehyde, had allergic rhinitis or an upper respiratory infection, the study found.

More than half of those ages 6 to 11 had a behavior or learning problem, yet in the East Baton Rouge School District children can wait for as long as two years to be tested for learning disabilities.

"Not only has their health not improved since the storm," the study said, "over time it has declined to an alarming level."

Medical care, counseling and child care are hard to find. In that respect, LaTonya London has been lucky. Her youngest children, born while the family lived at Renaissance Village, have two of the 16 Early Head Start slots — down from 200 right after the storm — reserved for evacuees of Hurricane Katrina in Baton Rouge. The baby, Edbony, was born with no forearms. Darren, 2, was two months premature and suffers from asthma and delayed speech.

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The eldest of Ms. London's five children, Darrell, 7, has developed behavior problems so serious that he has already been suspended several times from first grade, causing Ms. London to abandon plans to start vocational training, she said. In response, she has resumed counseling sessions for Darrell at the mobile clinic.

**Dr. Irwin Redlener, the director of the Children's Health Fund,** notes that there is as yet no comprehensive method of tracking these children, who are supposed to be the subject of a long-term study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The key to giving these children a future, doctors and educators have long said, is providing them with a sense of stability — a home that seems permanent, a school where they can put down roots. The recommendation is underscored by the gains made by those families that have found a toehold.

After months of looking, Laura Hilton, who is functionally illiterate, finally found an apartment in New Orleans for her and her two sons, George, 17, and Roy, 11, that was within walking distance of Roy's school. Laura's husband was murdered in New Orleans after the storm, and at the trailer park the Hilton children attended school only fitfully. Roy was known for being both endearing and utterly ungovernable.

Now Roy, who is at least three grades behind and needs special education, tutoring and counseling, can hardly be persuaded to leave school when the last bell rings. He helps teachers on their work days and shows up for Saturday detention even when he has not misbehaved. He fights less, and recently volunteered to sit in the principal's office at recess to keep from getting into trouble and losing his field-trip privileges.

"When he first came in, I was like, 'Why me?'" Wanda Brooks, the principal at the James Weldon Johnson Elementary School, said. "As a school, you're frustrated — why didn't somebody look at this when he was 10?" But then she got to know Roy.

"They begin to talk to you, and you begin to realize what the child went through," Ms. Brooks said. "He has not gotten over his dad's death."

Roy has received special attention from a male role model, Edward Williams, the football coach at Johnson. On a recent morning, Mr. Williams went into Roy's classroom to find him sulking at his desk while the other children practiced a dance routine.

Drawing Roy aside, Mr. Williams told him: "You got to get up and move around. You got to try."

Moments later, Roy was dancing.

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But life outside the trailers has not been a relief for every child. With its white tent that served as a community center, Renaissance Village reeked of impermanence, though for many young children who lived there it was almost the only home they had known.

Since the park closed, Adrian Love and her father, Alton, have moved into a Baton Rouge apartment (her mother, a crack user, lives in New Orleans). Mr. Love, who has not been able to hold a job since the storm, does not allow Adrian, 9, to play outside much, instead writing out long-division problems for her in a notebook after dinner.

On Adrian's first report card this year, she got straight A's. But she sees her friends from Renaissance Village only rarely. "I wish I still lived there," she said.

Despite her wistfulness, Adrian projects a poise that makes her seem resilient.

Children who had no serious problems before the storm are likely to recover well, said Toni Bankston, who until recently was the director of mental health at the **Baton Rouge Children's Health Project**. But, she estimated, only about 60 percent fall into that category.

Ms. Bankston has particularly grave concerns about the children who have fallen so far behind in school that there is little chance of their catching up. "What you're looking at is our future juvenile justice, our prison population," she said.

In October, Jermaine Howard returned to Baton Rouge and moved into the one-bedroom apartment occupied by his father, brother and grandmother. With the help of Sister Judith Brun, a nun who has been working with evacuees since the storm, he enrolled in ninth grade at Broadmoor High School.

That process alone provided a snapshot of the chaos of Jermaine's life. From several plastic baggies and a dented metal canister, the family could barely amass the documents needed to prove his address.

School administrators balked when they discovered that he had previously been registered under his father's last name, Griffin, not the name on his birth certificate. Jermaine, with tears in his eyes, was forced to explain that his mother was in prison. He was told to pay a visit to the ominous-sounding Board of Hearings. Then came the kicker: because he had already missed so much, he would receive no credit for this semester.

"Nice to see y'all," the school guidance counselor said by way of welcome. "Just too bad it wasn't about three months ago."