

Anxiety still rampant in Katrina kids, study says

By JANET McCONNAUGHEY and LINDSEY TANNER (AP) – August 23, 2010



NEW ORLEANS — A startling number of Gulf coast area children displaced by Hurricane Katrina still have serious emotional or behavioral problems five years later, a new study found.

More than one in three children studied — those forced to flee their homes because of the August 2005 storm — have since been diagnosed with mental health problems. These are children who moved to trailer parks and other emergency housing.

Nearly half of families studied still report household instability, researchers said.

"If children are bellwethers of recovery, then the social systems supporting affected Gulf Coast populations are still far from having recovered from Hurricane Katrina," the researchers said.

The study was published online Monday in the journal *Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness*.

Lead author David Abramson of Columbia University said researchers were astonished by the level of distress.

Children are "a bit of canary in a coal mine in that they really represent a failure or a dysfunction of many, many other systems in the community," said Abramson, who is with Columbia's National Center for Disaster Preparedness.

About 500,000 people, including more than 160,000 children, weren't able to return to their homes for at least three months after the storm hit on Aug. 29, 2005.

At least 20,000 of those children still have serious emotional disorders or behavior problems, or don't have a permanent home, the report suggests.

"Five years after Katrina, there are still tens of thousands of children and their families who are still living in limbo with a significant toll on their psychological well-being," said co-author Irwin Redlener, also with the Columbia center. In addition, he is president of the Children's Health Fund, an advocacy group that paid for the study.

Without significant government help, Redlener said, these children are likely to have even greater problems as adults.

Psychologist Joy Osofsky of Louisiana State University's Health Sciences Center agreed, but said it was important to note that children in general are much more resilient than those from the extremely poor families Redlener is studying.

Osofsky, who has been working with children at St. Bernard, Plaquemines and Orleans parish schools since the storm, said Redlener's study shows the effects of poverty, the trauma of Katrina trauma and what followed.

Redlener's group has been periodically studying 1,079 families in Louisiana and Mississippi since February 2006, six months after the storm struck. The latest interviews, from November 2009 through March, involved families with children between ages 5 and 18.

Over the five years, 38 percent out of 427 children have been diagnosed with anxiety, depression or a behavior disorder since Katrina. That's almost five times more likely than children from similar families evaluated before the hurricane.

The percentage of newly diagnosed children has declined in each round of interviews but the numbers are still almost double the national average, Abramson said.

Almost half of the households either were living in transient housing or had no guarantee that they'd be in their current quarters for more than a year.

In separate research, Osofsky has looked at about 5,000 fourth- through 12th-grade children screened last year in St. Bernard, Plaquemines and Orleans parish schools. Of that group, 31 percent showed some symptoms of depression or post-traumatic stress, but only 12 to 15 percent asked for individual or group counseling. The school-based program doesn't diagnose children, she said.

Redlener wants more mental health services available to children, government action to get the families into safe and stable housing, and more support for the families. He also says governments need to quickly collect information about children and families hurt by disaster and to ensure they can be helped as long as they need it.

"We know governments, state and federal, are dealing with a very deep recession..." he said. On the other hand, he said, "It's pay now or pay later — and the 'later' is extraordinarily expensive."

AP Medical Writer Lindsey Tanner contributed to this story from Chicago.

Online:

Children's Health Fund: <http://www.childrenshealthfund.org/>

Columbia University's National Center for Disaster Preparedness:
<http://www.ncdp.mailman.columbia.edu/>

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