



Katrina still has emotional grip on thousands of children

By Steve Sternberg, USA TODAY

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Five years later, Hurricane Katrina continues to wreak havoc in the lives of thousands of children who suffer from serious emotional disturbances, often compounded by a lack of stable housing, a study reports today.

Children displaced by the storm are nearly five times more likely than other kids to have severe emotional disturbances, and fewer than half of the children believed to need psychological help got it, the study says. It's published in the journal *Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness*.

"A significant number of children are still living under dangerous and traumatic conditions of persistent displacement," says study co-author Irwin Redlener, director of [Columbia University's](#) National Center for Disaster Preparedness.

The BP oil spill has added to their trauma, says the report, also sponsored by the Children's Health Fund. More than a third of parents living within a mile of the Gulf Coast say their children suffered physical or mental distress since the oil rig blew up April 20.

Katrina, which made landfall Aug. 29, 2005, flooded 80% of New Orleans and almost all of nearby [St. Bernard Parish](#). An estimated 1,600 people died. Property damage was valued at roughly \$80 billion. A month later, Hurricane Rita struck.

About 1.5 million people in Mississippi and Louisiana — 163,000 of them children — were displaced by the storms, the report says. Many were forced to leave the state, and some bounced from one temporary residence to another.

Nearly 60% of the children forced into group housing, such as trailer parks and hotels, now have emotional and behavioral problems. That number represents at least 20,000 children, the report says.

Among other findings:

- After 4½ years, half of families displaced for at least a year after the hurricane were still living in unstable housing with no promise they'd be able to stay more than a year.
- More than a third of children in middle school or high school were one or more years older than their classmates, suggesting that, because of their transient lives, they have fallen behind academically. That's compared with 19% of children elsewhere in the South.

"As a government and as a people, we've let those kids down who were traumatized by Katrina," says Mark Shriver of Save the Children and chairman of the National Commission on Children and Disasters. "Five years later, we're still letting them down. We still don't have a recovery system in place that meets children's needs."

The national commission, an independent, bipartisan group, is scheduled to vote today on recommendations to the president and Congress to close gaps in disaster preparedness, response and

long-term recovery for children. The commission and its backers hope their recommendations will be incorporated into legislation or form the basis of new regulations to protect children, Shriver says.

CLOSING THE GAPS

A four-point plan for kids caught up in Katrina and other crises:

- Immediately provide mental health services to children in need.
- Provide stable, safe housing.
- Provide needed support services for parents.
- Create systems for tracking and monitoring victims, for providing appropriate care, and for ensuring that victims continue to get help until their recovery is complete.

Sources: Children's Health Fund and the National Center for Disaster Preparedness of the Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health