

Katrina's toll on kids assessed

Mental health issues linger, study says

By Bruce Alpert

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WASHINGTON -- Five years after Hurricane Katrina, the psychological impact on children displaced by the disaster remains substantial, according to a new study.

The report, released Monday by the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health, found that 60 percent of children relocated after the hurricane to settings with other victims, such as hotels and trailer parks, have serious emotional disorders, behavior issues or continue to face housing instability.

More than one-third of the children displaced by the hurricane have been diagnosed with a mental health problem, such as depression, according to the report.

Among parents who sought professional mental health help for their children, fewer than half received assistance, the report said.

Despite significant recovery efforts, the study said that nearly half the households displaced for at least one year after the hurricane still were living in unstable conditions such as transient housing or other circumstances 4 1/2 years after the hurricane. Those unstable conditions are defined as situations where residents aren't guaranteed "a place to live for more than a year."

The lead researcher, Dr. Irwin Redlener, said the study points to a "major crisis facing the children of the post-Katrina Gulf region."

"From the perspective of the Gulf's most vulnerable children and families, the recovery from Katrina and the flooding of New Orleans has been a dismal failure," he said.

The research is consistent with other studies suggesting that family resilience and the emotional health of children are undermined by housing and community instability and the uncertainty of recovery.

"Previous studies have demonstrated a significant increase in the prevalence of anxiety, depression and post traumatic stress disorder following Hurricane Katrina, as well as a rise in violence and suicide," said Italo Subbarao, deputy editor of the American Medical Association's Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness journal.

Redlener said the population of children facing mental health problems or continued housing instability after Hurricane Katrina is still large, in the neighborhood of 20,000 kids.

Meanwhile, the National Commission on Children and Disasters voted Monday to send a detailed set of recommendations to President Barack Obama and the Congress for dealing with support for kids after a disaster. Commission Chairman Mark Shriver said the report should be ready by October.

Shriver said a key recommendation is for the government to put a priority on rebuilding child-care facilities. Just as parents won't return to a community until schools are back operating, those with preschool children can't afford to come back without child-care facilities, he said.

Another need, he said, is to get emergency medical-response teams equipped with medical devices and medicine for children. A defibrillator intended for an adult, Shriver said, won't work for a child. Likewise adult dosages of medicines dispensed to a child could be fatal, he said.

"Politicians from both parties talk about the need to take care of children in disasters, but they haven't been willing to put money where their mouths are," said Shriver, managing director of Save the Children's U.S. Programs.

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