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Emotional problems linger for children displaced by Katrina

A study finds that although access to medical care has improved, they remain traumatized by "the perpetual disaster of an unstable future."

By KEVIN B. O'REILLY, *amednews* staff. Posted Sept. 9, 2010.

More than a third of children from Gulf Coast families uprooted by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 are still experiencing serious emotional problems, according to a new study that demonstrates the long-term challenges of recovering from disasters.

The study tracked 283 Katrina-displaced children since January 2006 and found they are nearly five times more likely than a pre-Katrina national comparison sample to have "serious emotional disturbance," a mental health category similar to posttraumatic stress disorder that accounts for children's distress and social, behavioral and functional impairment.

The families' access to medical care has vastly improved since 2006, but a distinct "Katrina effect" is still hindering children's recovery, said the study, published in a September supplement of the American Medical Association journal *Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness* (www.dmphp.org/cgi/content/abstract/dmp.2010.7v1/).

"There has been a very prolonged period of uncertainty and instability for these families," said Irwin Redlener, MD, the study's co-author and director of the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health in New York. "These children were not only traumatized by the original disaster and displacement, but the perpetual disaster of an unstable future. That wears away at the resilience of kids and families."

Fewer than 10% of the families are still living in Federal Emergency Management Agency trailers or government-paid hotel rooms, but about a third of households have incomes of less than \$10,000. Most parents surveyed said their children attend unsafe schools, and most families had moved in the previous year. About half of parents said their children need mental health treatment but do not get it.

The findings reveal the lingering, less-publicized toll that disasters exact on survivors, said study co-author David M. Abramson, PhD, MPH, research director at Columbia's National Center for Disaster Preparedness.

"What can you see and what can you measure in the face of a disaster?" Abramson asked. "The number of buildings collapsed, the extent of the infrastructure destroyed, the lives lost, the dollars lost, the number of homes lost. And recovery is measured against those metrics, or by the balance of people returning or those elements being restored. But then what's not counted, or seen, is how well people recover."

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