

Gulf Coast Kids of Every Class Affected by Katrina

By Marilyn Elias, USA TODAY
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Nearly two years after it hit, Hurricane Katrina continues to wreak havoc in the lives of many Gulf Coast children of every socioeconomic class, says Corey Hebert, a New Orleans pediatrician.

"The difference is, the poor ones ended up stranded on a bridge with no food or water for three days," he says, "while the better-off ones saw it on TV. Their houses may have been destroyed, but they weren't here to see it. If you had kids and a car that worked, generally you weren't here."

Spared the brunt of physical trauma, many affluent children are doing better than the poor ones, Hebert says. But families came back to demolished neighborhoods and new financial strains, discovering they'd lost friends or relatives who had left town. So Hebert says he sees plenty of middle-class kids with anxiety and depression linked to Katrina's effects.

Panic attacks during rainy weather are common, says Hebert, but therapists to treat childhood panic are very scarce.

What really rips him apart is seeing what's become of some kids who were doing so well before Katrina, Hebert says. There's the "smart, articulate" 14-year-old whose house was destroyed and now smokes two packs of cigarettes a day — he learned to smoke from adults while evacuated to Houston. Now he's jammed into a house with about a dozen other people, because there's no rebuilding money yet.

Hebert was shocked at how disheveled the formerly well-dressed child had become. An excellent student before the storm, the boy's grades have fallen, his mother says. Hebert says he could locate neither a therapist nor a smoking cessation program for the child, despite vigorous efforts.

Another patient, a 15-year-old with well-educated parents, moved back into his rebuilt suburban home a few months ago. But he found the old neighborhood, devastated by Katrina, virtually abandoned. "All his friends are gone," Hebert says.

Hebert was puzzled at his nurse's note saying "behavior problem" because the boy had always been well-adjusted and was a member of the National Honor Society. His worried mother forced the teen to roll up his shirt sleeves for the doctor. He had bad scars from where he'd mutilated himself with a razor blade.

"This child is lonely and feels hopeless, he's depressed," Hebert says. "This would have never happened — never, never, never — with this kid, but for the hurricane." The boy asked his doctor to help but said he felt so isolated and that things would never get better.

Many children are mourning the loss of close-knit extended family — a tradition in New Orleans — who have moved far away because Katrina took their jobs and/or homes, Hebert adds.

And the shortage of counselors for kids is sometimes too much for even a dispassionate doctor to tolerate, he says. In two severe cases, Hebert says he has paid for young patients to go out of state for psychiatric diagnoses because no experts were available locally and their parents couldn't afford the trip.

"We have to take care of these kids somehow," he says. "We have to get them treatment and put the community back together."