

Tropical Depression: Hurricane Linked to Long-Term Mental Distress

Description

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Newswise — Florida State University sociologists in Tallahassee, Fla. have found that some South Floridians who survived 1992's Hurricane Andrew suffered mental health problems many years later, a finding that has led the researchers to predict even more dire consequences for those who lived through last year's devastating Hurricane Katrina.

The researchers, sociology doctoral student and lead author David Russell and professors John Taylor and Donald Lloyd, presented their findings at the 2006 annual meeting of the Southern Sociological Society held recently in New Orleans. Although the short-term mental health consequences of Hurricane Andrew have been documented, this study of adolescents is the first to show that it had long-term effects on mental health.

"We found that people who experienced prior stressful events and who had pre-existing symptoms of psychological distress were more adversely affected by exposure to hurricane-related stressful events," Russell said.

"Based on our findings, we believe intervention efforts should include assessments of the prior experiences and psychological well-being of disaster victims. Doing so will aid response workers in identifying those most at risk for developing post-disaster psychological problems."

The findings suggest that the mental health consequences of Hurricane Katrina, which struck the Gulf Coast on Aug. 29, 2005, will be even greater. Although the storms were similar in strength, the human and economic costs associated with Katrina far exceeded those of Andrew. Deaths associated with Katrina were more than 50 times greater than those attributed to Andrew, and economic analysts predict that the total economic cost of Katrina will surpass \$200 billion, which is more than five times the cost of Andrew.

"We believe that victims of Hurricane Katrina will be at an increased risk for mental health problems for many years to come," Russell said. "The extent of damage was widespread and hundreds of thousands of people were displaced from their homes and families. Those aspects of the storm mean that many people were exposed to some degree

of adversity, and that puts them at greater risk for mental health problems both immediately and over a long period of time."

Delays in rescuing people who were stranded by the flooding in New Orleans compounded the anguish of the Katrina survivors, the researchers noted.

"The slow response by governmental agencies to rescue the victims produced feelings of hopelessness, isolation and anger," Russell said. "In the meantime, exposure to human carnage has placed victims and recovery workers at great risk for a wide array of psychological problems."

Hurricane Andrew, a Category 5 storm on the Saffir-Simpson Hurricane Scale, hit South Florida on Aug. 24, 1992. The hurricane caused 25 deaths in Miami-Dade County alone. At the time, the damage inflicted by Andrew was unprecedented in U.S. history with total economic losses estimated at \$35 billion. More than 250,000 people were left homeless, and the community's recovery from the storm took years.

The researchers studied data from 975 Miami-Dade County adolescents who lived through Hurricane Andrew to assess psychological distress before, during and five to seven years after the storm. They measured disruption by counting the occurrence of five events: damage to one's home; being away from home for longer than a week; injury to a family member; having one or both parents lose a job; and having to stay in a shelter.

Not only did Andrew cause emotional distress immediately following the hurricane, the researchers found that it indirectly affected mental health years later. The storm of emotion following the hurricane increased risk for certain stressful life events, such as failing a grade in school, being sent away from home or having to live away from parents.

Russell said the findings likely underestimated the true psychological impact of Hurricane Andrew because those most adversely affected by the hurricane may have relocated from the Miami-Dade area, and thus would have been left out of the follow-up surveys. In addition, the study measured some but not all of the common experiences associated with the disaster, such as perceptions of safety during the storm, loss of personal belongings and living without electricity and adequate food or water after the storm.