

## **Katrina Aftermath Touch on Mental Health: New Orleans' coroner says hurricane-related stress 'is a recipe for suicide'**

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With a newborn daughter, an autistic child and a fledgling music business, life was chaotic enough for Jerome "Slim Rome" Spears and fiancée Rachel Harris.

Then Hurricane Katrina hit, chasing them from New Orleans, throwing both out of work and putting Spears' plans to "dominate" the hip-hop scene on indefinite hold.

This week, in an Atlanta-area rental home hundreds of miles from the Big Easy, Spears shot his fiancée to death, severely wounded her 4-year-old son with a bullet to the back of the head, and then killed himself. The couple's 5-month-old daughter, born amid the Katrina chaos, was unharmed but is now an orphan.

Suicide is complicated, experts say, and exactly what role the hurricane played in the tragedy is unclear. But New Orleans' coroner says he has seen enough to know that the stress caused by Katrina "is a recipe for suicide if I've ever seen one."

"You can imagine how it feels to lose your house, to lose your job and to lose a loved one," says Dr. Frank Minyard, who attributes seven suicides in his flood-stricken city alone to Katrina-related stress.

While suicides and violent deaths have yet to be fully tallied among scattered Katrina evacuees, reports of such cases are already numerous.

Five days after Christmas in the Dallas-Fort Worth suburb of Grapevine, evacuee Ryan Peter Ruiz, facing imminent eviction from a temporary apartment, killed his wife and 14-year-old son with a shotgun, then took his own life. Houston-area officials report at least two evacuee suicides.

Filmmaker Stevenson J. Palfi, 53, whose 1982 documentary "Piano Players Rarely Ever Play Together" chronicled the lives of three New Orleans jazzmen, shot himself at his home Dec. 14. Relatives say he had been severely depressed after losing most of his possessions to Katrina.

### **Calls to hot line double**

Calls to the National Suicide Prevention hot line more than doubled in the month after the Aug. 29 storm that swamped more than 80 percent of New Orleans, ripped up the Mississippi and Alabama coasts, and claimed more than 1,300 lives.

Katrina knocked out Charity Hospital, greater New Orleans' primary mental-health crisis center with 96 beds. There are waiting lists for beds, and Dr. Tony Speier has heard disturbing anecdotes of suicides among people who had "focus and purpose in their lives."

“It’s definitely a crisis,” says Speier, director of the federally funded Louisiana Spirit crisis counseling program. “The resources that were present that people relied on for years are severely compromised.”

But as traumatic as Katrina was, Dr. Holly A. Parker says it would be wrong to blame all of these suicides on the storm.

“I can tell you that a very common myth that people have is that there was one thing, one event that pushed someone over the edge,” says Parker, a psychopathologist who is part of a Harvard Medical School project assessing the mental health needs of Katrina survivors. “The reality is that people who die by suicide have what is called a suicidal career, meaning that it’s not just one thing that happened.”

Just what might have pushed Spears over the edge is unclear.

The 28-year-old Air Force veteran was chief executive of On Top Enterprise Management and Production, a company that promoted small-time New Orleans music acts. Plugging artists with names such as GunSlanga, Tru Thug and Menace, Spears said on his Web site that his goal was to “dominate the hip-hop, R&B and pop sectors in the music industry.”

Five days before his death, Spears e-mailed co-worker and Web designer Andy Koch. A record executive had suggested Spears tone down his “gangsta” image, and Spears — who had a 1996 weapons charge from Tacoma, Wash., on his record — asked Koch to “remove a couple of negative things” from the site.

Bart Kelly, Spears’ attorney, says Spears “sounded OK” when he called him from Georgia about a month ago.

“He had some good things that were going on and he had some troubles, much like other people who’ve been dealing with having to leave their hometown and everything else,” Kelly says. “I think he was excited about having a baby, and my understanding was he generally enjoyed his relationship.”

But late Tuesday, Spears called an aunt in New Orleans to tell her he had killed Harris, and to ask her to call police. When SWAT team members broke into the home, they found Harris dead on the living room floor, gunshot wounds to the head. Nearby, the boy, with a severe head wound, moaned as he sat strapped in a high chair that was, in turn, tied to the leg of a couch.

Spears lay dead on a bed upstairs, a .25-caliber pistol in his hand and another gun beside him. Police say he left no note.

“He seemed like a guy who might do something good with himself,” Kelly says. “Obviously, he’s done something very bad with himself.”

In her work with Harvard, Parker has talked with more than a dozen Katrina survivors. So far, none has expressed suicidal thoughts.

“If anything, there’s much more of a message of resilience,” says Parker, who was married in New Orleans last year and whose own mother-in-law lost everything.

When someone commits suicide, Parker tells the survivors not to beat themselves up about that last fight or cross word. If Spears hadn’t killed himself that day, she says, he might have done so a week or even a month later.

“It’s possible that he might not have committed suicide absent Katrina,” she says. “We can’t say for sure.”

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