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Many Children Struggling After '05 Storms

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At least 46,600 children along the Gulf Coast are still struggling with mental health problems and other serious aftereffects of 2005 hurricanes, according to a new study by the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University and the Children's Health Fund.

Many of these children are performing poorly in school and have limited access to medical care, according to the study, which combines government statistics with data collected by a group of researchers that has been closely following about 1,250 families displaced by the storm.

The children most at risk are those who have returned to their home states of Louisiana and Mississippi but lack stable living situations, the study says.

They are children like Nicole D. Riley's daughter Isis, who is about to turn 4. Her family left New Orleans the day before Hurricane Katrina and moved five times over a short period before ending up in the large government-operated trailer park in Baker, La. All those moves "really didn't sit well with her," Ms. Riley said of her daughter. "When we got out here to the park, she was out of control, out of hand. She was not like that before the storm."

Although the uncontrollable temper tantrums have stopped, Ms. Riley said in a telephone interview, Isis remains worryingly moody, and all three of her children have been suffering from rashes. And they are going to have to move again. The government plans to close the trailer park next spring, and Ms. Riley and her fiancé are already looking for a new place to live.

Doctors treating Isis and other children "have been reporting just tremendous problems, especially the mental health providers," said Dr. Irwin Redlener, president of the Children's Health Fund and director of the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia. "We are alarmed at the continuing downward trend, the longer the state of limbo continues."

Moving beyond anecdotal evidence is difficult, but the study tries to quantify the number of children who remain at risk. "It's meant to answer the question, what is the magnitude of the problem here," said David Abramson, the center's research director.

Looking at federal census data, school enrollment statistics and figures from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the study concludes that about 163,000 children were displaced by the storms and that 81,000 to 95,000 have returned to Louisiana and Mississippi. An estimated 11,200 children were still living in FEMA trailers at government or private trailer parks at the end of September, according to the report, though that number has been dropping as the government begins closing the parks.

To determine how many of the returned children are likely to be experiencing problems, the researchers extrapolated from the findings of their continuing study of Gulf Coast families, which has found almost a third of the children examined have developed depression, anxiety or behavior disorders since the hurricanes.

In Louisiana, parents of about a quarter of the children reported that performance at school has slipped sharply since the storms; that has not been as much of an issue in Mississippi, where a bigger problem has been the loss of doctors or health insurance. While poor families fared far worse than wealthier ones in Louisiana, in Mississippi the results were similar for families with incomes of less than \$10,000 and those with incomes of over \$35,000.

Over all, the report concludes that 46,600 to 64,900 children are experiencing serious poststorm problems, though Dr. Redlener said he puts the number at about 55,000.

Roberta Avila, executive director of the Mississippi Coast Interfaith Disaster Task Force, said that figure sounds right. "We still have a lot of families in trailers, and the stress of living in that situation is really tough," she said. Despite strong community and volunteer efforts, she continued, she is hearing increasing reports of problems ranging from children having trouble doing homework all the way up to suicides.

In New Orleans, one of the biggest problems for children is that their extended families are no longer nearby, said David J. Ward, a health policy analyst and founder of the Louisiana Health Services Recovery Council. "The fabric of the family has splintered," Mr. Ward said. "Who is going to take care of the kids after school, or draw them into becoming musicians?"