

Trauma Shapes Katrina's Kids

By Marilyn Elias, USA TODAY
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New Orleans pediatrician Corey Hebert dreads the rainy weeks when he knows he'll face about 20 sobbing, screaming children in full-blown panic attacks.

"They can't be calmed because they're terrified another hurricane is coming," he says. Parents bring them in because there are no therapists around.

Hebert says about 5% of children in his medical practice had mental-health problems before Hurricane Katrina; now it's 50%.

Psychologist Leslie Higgins, whose suburban practice is full, sees storm-related trouble daily. "If they were prone to anxiety, they've become more anxious. If they were prone to acting out, they've become much more defiant and irritable. Many are depressed, and this is how depression shows up in kids."

Nearly two years after Hurricane Katrina struck, the toll the storm and slow recovery are taking on Gulf Coast children will be among the topics covered at the American Psychological Association meeting. The conference begins Friday in San Francisco.

There are no overall numbers on the scope of children's problems. In a study last fall, two out of five New Orleans students in fourth through 12th grades had symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder or depression. About as many have the same symptoms in 2007 studies still being analyzed, says Howard Osofsky, chairman of the psychiatry department at Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center.

Children are doing fairly well in Jefferson Parish near New Orleans, an area with less property destruction but one taking in many students displaced by Katrina, psychologist Denise Newman will report at the psychology meeting.

About 21% of middle and high school kids had mental health or behavior problems, according to surveys last fall and this spring; 9% were serious. The figures are not significantly different from average rates in public schools, she says.

On the other hand, a Mississippi Gulf Coast survey by the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University found that half of parents said their children had developed emotional or behavior problems after the storm.

About two-thirds were depressed; nearly as many felt afraid. The survey was done a year ago, and preliminary findings from a survey this summer aren't much different, says David Abramson, research director at the center.

It is no surprise that many Gulf Coast children still feel painfully tossed around two years after Katrina, mental health experts say. The extent of loss is often a strong predictor of trauma after disasters, says trauma expert Russell Jones of Virginia Tech.

"What's unique about Katrina is how much children have lost," he says. "So many have lost virtually everything: their homes, their neighborhoods, close extended families who are often scattered, their friends and churches."

Getting jobs back, rebuilding houses and other community recovery efforts speed recovery for kids, says Robert Pynoos, co-director of the UCLA-Duke University National Center for Child Traumatic Stress.

But New Orleans has a long way to go, says Heidi Sinclair, a pediatrician who supervises mobile pediatric care vans that serve schools and FEMA trailer parks for evacuees. The vans, supported by the Children's Health Fund in New York, also provide therapy. "We can meet only a small percentage of the need," says psychologist Paula Madrid. Based on new FEMA trailer counts, 25,000 to 30,000 Katrina-displaced children are still living in trailers, says Abramson of the Columbia disaster center.

Like adult, like child

How well parents cope after disasters greatly influences how children fare. Adults have been hit hard, a large new survey suggests.

"Kids catch the worst of it because they're totally dependent on parents," Higgins says. "Depressed mothers is a big problem for kids."

Many moms face storm-related stress — insurance disputes, money pressures, rebuilding headaches. "We all call it 'Katrina brain,'" Higgins says. "You forget to pick up the kids; there's so much stress that you can't focus on them."

As for that depressed mother, "she isn't getting better anytime soon," Higgins says, because so many therapists have fled that it's tough to find help.

The federal government is financing incentives to try to keep therapists in the area and recruit more, says Brandon Romano of the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals.

Nobody knows exactly how many counselors who treat kids have left — or returned. The wait for a therapist at Children's Hospital of New Orleans is about a year, compared with six months before the storm, says Douglas Faust, head of the psychology department.

The delays can hurt children with serious disorders.

Sheila Pécot's 13-year-old son, Austin, has several problems, including obsessive-compulsive disorder and Asperger's syndrome. Mainstreamed at school, he was doing well on medication and weekly therapy, she says.

Austin lost his therapist just before Katrina. After the storm, Pécot was able to get the boy's medicine, but it took 18 months "and dozens of calls" to find a therapist with a spot open every other week.

"We lost so much during that time. He fell further and further behind socially. At a time when friendships are so important to kids, his best friend is a computer game," she says. Later this month, a weekly therapy spot will finally open.

"He also badly needs a social skills group," she says. "They used to have groups for kids with Asperger's, but not since the storm."

If a mentally ill child needs to be hospitalized, even in a crisis, he likely will be sent far from home, says Ernestine Gray, a judge in New Orleans Juvenile Court.

Many New Orleans psychiatric beds were lost to hurricane damage; only 15 are open for children.

"Kids with serious mental illness used to spend six months to a year in a hospital where they'd be stabilized. Now they're in for a day or two and discharged," says Jim Arey, commander of the negotiation team for New Orleans' police swat unit.

It's often a revolving door for psychotic children, who may turn suicidal, he says.

Children's Hospital of New Orleans plans to add 17 adolescent beds this month, "but it's nowhere near enough," says psychiatrist Mark Townsend of Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center.

Schools are ground zero

School is where troubles often surface. Aggression and defiance have soared since the hurricane, says Susan Ratterree, who supervises school psychologists in Plaquemines Parish near New Orleans. There were about half as many students last year as before the storm — and the same number of suspensions, she says.

Some schools are adding counselors. Too many classroom brawls and depressed students prompted Jefferson Parish to start a therapy program last fall in 43 schools, says program director Elaine Kalka.

The students' mental health and behavior significantly improved by spring, according to a report due at the psychology meeting.

And child psychologist Douglas Walker is training and adding counselors at 45 New Orleans area schools in a project funded by Catholic Charities USA.

Many experts believe some of the worst-off children still live in tiny FEMA trailers intended to be temporary housing.

Trinity Williams, 7, has been at a trailer park in Baker, La., since October 2005. Donna Azeez, her single mother, says she carried Trinity out of their flooded neighborhood on her back. She caught a ride to a Baton Rouge church shelter.

"It was chaos. ... And Trinity got very, very wild," Azeez says. Since they've moved to the Baker trailer park, the girl's behavior has worsened, Azeez says.

"She was always a loving child. Now she's angry and quick to fight. It's out of defense. I've seen other kids come up and smack her hard for no reason. It's because they're going through so much with their parents."

Azeez, who recounts incidents of unsupervised 2-year-olds and child abuse at the trailers, put Trinity in counseling at the mobile medical van and started antidepressants herself a few months ago.

Azeez is looking for work in Baton Rouge — their New Orleans neighborhood was virtually leveled. "The best thing for Trinity would be to just get out of here," she says.

But many children are doing OK there, says Arcenia Crayton, who plans education and enrichment programs in the trailer park. Truancy has dropped, and there are many group activities and a large playground, Crayton says.

Some older New Orleans children have fared well emotionally, says psychologist Higgins, because they have stepped up to help in the prolonged crisis.

"Teens get a job because money's tight, or start to take care of their little brother," Higgins says.

Such positive action can help build resilience in children after disasters, says trauma expert Pynoos. His research shows good therapy also can turn children around even after horrific natural disasters.

But there are still a lot of troubled children awash in the fierce wake of Katrina.

"They've got no say in this and no leverage for change," says police commander Arey.

"Our job is to take care of these kids, and we're not doing a very good job of it."