

Children's Adjustment in the Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina

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A single disaster can be far reaching, affecting thousands or millions of lives. Families can be affected on a variety of levels, including basic needs (e.g., loss of resources), financial strain, and emotional and behavioral functioning. Hurricane Katrina was one of the most devastating natural disasters in the United States, causing heavy destruction of homes and businesses, job loss, and death in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. Over 500,000 homes were damaged or destroyed by Hurricane Katrina and, as a result, an extraordinary number of families have been displaced. In fact, the city of Baton Rouge alone has grown substantially in population due to an influx of displaced residents from New Orleans and other affected areas.

A significant body of disaster research exists around basic prevalence and risk estimates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, and substance use with disaster-affected adults. In addition, several studies have examined the needs of disaster-affected children and families, most of which have focused on PTSD symptoms and distress. Taken together, these studies have valuable public health implications and give insight into some of the ways that children and families can be affected by a natural disaster. However, these studies offer limited guidance on a variety of key issues that are critical to move toward the goal of assisting populations who are affected by large-scale disasters. First, limited data are available with regard to key domains of functioning other than PTSD and distress (e.g., behavior change, academic progress, social adjustment) for which disasters may increase risk among youth. Second, little is known about the effects of displacement on youth and family functioning. Because displacement is likely to co-occur with job loss, financial strain, disruption of the social network, change in daily routines, and change in academic and occupational settings, it is important to understand the nature and scope of these circumstances and how they relate to family and youth functioning. Third, post-disaster studies of youth that include comparison samples and longitudinal designs are important, but rare given limited resources and other difficulties associated with conducting research with disaster-affected populations.

Primary aims of our research are to examine the impact of Hurricane Katrina and displacement on youth mental health, social behavior, school adjustment, and family functioning. Potential protective and risk factors associated with the relation between displacement (as well as other hurricane exposure variables) and child adjustment will be investigated. Specifically, we will identify and track the prevalence, severity, and stability of youth psychological, behavioral, and social functioning (e.g., PTSD, depression, school behavior, academic performance, truancy, peer relationships) in displaced vs. non-displaced youth in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina over time (7 weeks, 7 months, 13 months, 19 months). With regard to school functioning, we will have the unique opportunity to compare children's pre- and post-hurricane school functioning for all students participating in the project who are enrolled in the LA public school system. Finally, we will identify risk factors (e.g. low socioeconomic status, displacement, violence exposure, maternal distress, personal loss, life threat) and protective factors (family

routines, coping, social support) associated with the relation between displacement and children's overall adjustment.

This project will build on prior post-disaster research by collecting longitudinal data with outcomes addressing several domains of child functioning including mental health, social, school, and family functioning. This study will have the power to examine potentially modifiable factors associated with resilience, recovery, and psychopathology among youth following disaster exposure. Last, the proposed project will provide us with critical information about the effects of displacement on children and families in the aftermath of a natural disaster, a significantly understudied phenomenon to date. We anticipate that findings will have significant implications for public health, and study findings will be used to develop public education resources and materials that may be useful to families in the aftermath of future disasters.

Our study recently was funded by NIHM for us to conduct our research over the next two years in Orleans, Jefferson, and Baton Rouge Parishes. We have already collected data on 225 families and will recruit an additional 200 shortly. We appreciate all of the support we have