

Lack of mental health care in New Orleans leaves children at risk

WASHINGTON - Nearly two years after Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast region, the city of New Orleans is struggling to fill gaps in its mental health care system that could potentially leave thousands of children vulnerable to depression, teenage suicide and pregnancy.

There is a particular need for mental health care specialists with the start of a new hurricane season; fears, anxiety and even depression surface in young children who think that another hurricane is on its way.

"They're going to think that every storm is Hurricane Katrina," said Doug Walker, clinical director of the Catholic-run Mercy Family Center in New Orleans.

"That's a psychological anniversary for them," he told Catholic News Service in a recent telephone interview.

Psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, counselors and clinical nurses fall under the umbrella of mental health care specialists. While their services are at a premium nationwide, the need is even greater in New Orleans.

"There certainly is a work-force shortage," said William Payne, assistant secretary for the Office of Mental Health at the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals.

"We're having significant difficulty recruiting."

Payne said the number of psychiatrists in the greater New Orleans area was reduced by 80 percent after Katrina. The higher cost of living and the risk of future hurricanes have made returning to New Orleans less attractive for most specialists.

New Orleans' medical infrastructure was already top-heavy and not fully integrated with the mental health care system, Payne said, but after Hurricane Katrina "the entire health care system was literally dismantled."

"Now that all the children are stressed, we clearly don't have enough mental health care providers," said Dr. Harold Ginzburg, a professor of clinical psychiatry at Louisiana State University and Tulane University, both in New Orleans. "Tulane's medical school went to Houston," he told CNS.

Studies published by Louisiana State University and Columbia University in New York found that children affected by the hurricane have higher rates of depression, anxiety, behavioral problems and post-traumatic stress disorder. If untreated, the

children stand a greater chance of criminal behavior and poor adjustment into adulthood.

Payne said these issues are likely to have a spiral effect on the community in general.

Over time, "I think we'll find a number of byproducts," he said. "You have issues in the rise of unemployment; all those things are escalated when people don't have access" to health care, he said.

According to another Louisiana State University study, which screened 7,000 children on their feelings about Hurricane Katrina, roughly 90 percent witnessed Katrina-related damage, 45 percent had their homes destroyed, and 26 percent were separated from their caregivers.

Hurricane Katrina is regarded as one of the worst natural disasters in U.S. history. It caused the levees in New Orleans to break, with the water flooding much of the city and displacing hundreds of thousands of people.

Psychologists say it is the displacement of entire communities that has been particularly difficult for young children, and living in the aftermath of Katrina has created secondary trauma.

"Now they're living in a trailer. Their parents have lost their jobs or are living out of town," Walker said.

Children are generally resilient when faced with traumatic experiences, he said. But the annual threat of hurricane season always brings back fears and anxiety among young children that another storm could strike.

Likewise, Ginzburg, who traditionally counsels adults on work-related issues, said as hurricane season neared his clients began discussing their children or bringing in their families.

Students also are angrier. Twenty-four percent of children in the Louisiana State University survey said they were angry when they thought about Hurricane Katrina. Catholic schools were the first to reopen in New Orleans following the hurricane. School counselors at Cathedral Academy in New Orleans were struck by the fact that students didn't use the word "sad" in describing their feelings. Instead, they would often say they were angry.

"They lost their home; they've lost their friends," Walker said. "As a child they have a lot to be angry about."

Often the anger and stress create a cyclical effect: Parents were likely to pass their

frustrations at being overworked or not receiving federal recovery funds to their children who in turn took their frustrations to school, to teachers, other students and back to their parents.

“We’re the wounded helping the wounded,” Walker said.