



In the midst of New Orleans' devastation lies the hidden damage of mental illness.

THE STORM WITHIN

Three years after Hurricane Katrina, much of New Orleans still struggles to rebuild, with neighborhoods lying in wreckage and residents living in trailers. But beyond the physical ruins are deep emotional wounds—a problem that officials are calling a mental health crisis **BY CHANDRA R. THOMAS**

Rainy days are especially gloomy for La'Tina King. When dark clouds loom and the sky turns a deep shade of gray in her suburb of New Orleans, the single mother of five girls, ages 5 to 9, braces for her middle child's violent reaction. "She screams, she scratches and fights herself," says King of her 7-year-old, whose outbursts ultimately led to a post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) diagnosis. "She keeps saying, 'Katrina is coming. Katrina is going to eat me.'"

Raindrops remind the little girl of the massive flooding that destroyed their rental house and damaged much of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast three years ago. Once, when a storm passed through, it got so bad that King had to comfort her daughter in a sandwich shop for more than an hour as her

four sisters looked on. King embraced her and assured her that Katrina wouldn't return.

Struggling to Stay Afloat

"I feel like a prisoner because I never know when it's going to rain," says King, who contends that the demands of caring for her troubled children have left her unable to work or afford a home of her own. Sharing her story of survival during and after the storm, the 27-year-old rattles off details like a decorated war veteran. Nearly getting trapped in a hotel amid rising floodwaters, seeking refuge in temporary shelters, briefly taking an apartment in unfamiliar Dallas, then moving into her mother's cramped Woodmere, Louisiana, home—all with five young children in tow—was

taxing. The emotional aftermath has been overwhelming.

"What has the biggest effect on people is the recovery, more so than the event of Katrina itself," says Christopher Curtis, Ph.D., a school-based social worker who provides mental health services to teens. "There are a lot of communities that still look like Katrina happened yesterday. When you wake up every day and see the devastation and how slow things are moving, you're retraumatized."

A 2007 survey by the Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center found that in New Orleans' most devastated areas, 45 percent of students in fourth through twelfth grades had symptoms of PTSD or depression. Howard Osofsky, M.D., Ph.D., chairman of Louisiana State University's department of psychiatry, says the same mental health problems have risen in adults. "They may not have a job, they may not be back in their home, or they travel each day through areas that are still not rebuilt," says Osofsky. "There are all sorts of pressures on people."

King was once so overwhelmed with post-Katrina stress that she swallowed a handful of pills in a suicide attempt and had to be hospitalized briefly. Now when the load gets unbearable, she brings her girls to a friend's house and takes some time to decompress.

"Sometimes I drive, or I go to a park and just scream until I can't scream anymore," King says tearfully.

A City on the Verge

King and her girls are among a fortunate few who have received treatment in a mental health crisis worsened by a shortage of mental health professionals and psychiatric-care hospital rooms. Most of the professionals who evacuated have not returned. An August 2006 article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* noted that the number of licensed psychiatrists in the greater New Orleans area dropped from 196 pre-Katrina to 22 in the immediate weeks after the storm.

"We've lobbied very heavily on the federal and state levels to get more inpatient hospital beds," says New Orleans mayor Ray Nagin. "That has primarily been our focus, to get the outpatient services and inpatient facilities back." Nagin adds that progress has been slow. "It wasn't until this past February that we started to receive any significant federal dollars. It's been quite a challenge and, at times, very frustrating."

"You have 10,000 more problems and not even 10 percent of the resources that were available before the storm," says Corey Hebert, M.D., a pediatrician and an assistant professor of medicine at Tulane University. The treatment shortfall, Hebert says, has only increased depression, suicide and panic disorders—and

the Black community is suffering the most. "The areas that got destroyed were mostly Black. We are at a total disadvantage."

Local, state and federal agencies are taking steps to address the problem. The New Orleans Health Department is working to secure funding to restore vacant hospitals, and in July, Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal signed a bill allocating \$89 million in additional funds for mental health care, mostly for the New Orleans area. The Behavioral Health Action Network of Greater New Orleans, a nonprofit health care organization created in

The number of psychiatrists in the New Orleans area dropped from 196 to 22 in the weeks after the storm.



King and her daughters share a happy moment of respite at a 2007 birthday party.

November 2006, is supporting efforts to retain and recruit more mental health professionals. "I see a new day," says Kevin Stephens, M.D., director of the New Orleans Health Department. "The rebuilding is really starting to happen, and when people see that, it translates directly to their emotional welfare. It's uplifting." Still, experts agree mental health needs in metro New Orleans are far from being met.

As for King, she is hopeful that life will eventually improve for her and her children. "The treatment is making a difference with them," she says. "But I know I have a long road ahead." □

CHILDREN AND POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS: WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Three years after Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast, the storm continues to take a toll on the victims. Experts say post-traumatic stress disorder can affect children who have been through experiences such as a natural disaster, sexual abuse or an automobile accident.

Here are signs parents should be aware of in children

- Worries about dying
- Loss of interest in activities
- Problems sleeping
- Increased anger
- Problems concentrating

For more information about PTSD, call the Sidran Institute at 888-825-8249 or check out its Web site at Sidran.org.

—EBONI BARNES

PAOLO FELLEGRINI/MAGNUM PHOTOS, COURTESY OF SUBJECT.