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Impact of Hurricanes Rita and Katrina on Youth Tobacco Use in Jefferson County

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The devastating effects of 2005 Hurricanes Katrina and Rita on property damage along the Gulf Coast are well known. The breach of the levees created havoc and changed life forever for many New Orleans residents. Many who had left their homes and migrated west into Texas due to Hurricane Katrina became part of a second wave of evacuees along with Texas residents when Hurricane Rita hit landfall a week later causing catastrophic damage along the upper Texas Gulf Coast.

2006 Texas Youth Tobacco Survey

During the 2006 administration of the Youth Tobacco Survey, researchers added questions to determine if students' tobacco use rates were affected by hurricane-related events as well as how they personally were affected by Hurricanes Katrina or Rita. The 2006 Texas Youth Tobacco Survey was administered to entire student bodies at "sentinel" schools, schools in Jefferson, Fort Bend, Harris, Smith, Taylor, and Webb Counties. Several of these areas have been involved in the Texas Tobacco Prevention Initiative since its

inception while others were part of a smaller random sample of students attending schools in other parts of Texas. This report reflects data collected in Jefferson County along the upper Texas Gulf Coast, one of the areas hardest hit by Hurricane Rita. The analysis is based on the response of over 5100 middle and high school students residing in Jefferson County 6-9 months following landfall of the hurricanes.

Higher Youth Smoking Rates Tied to Traumatic Events in Jefferson County

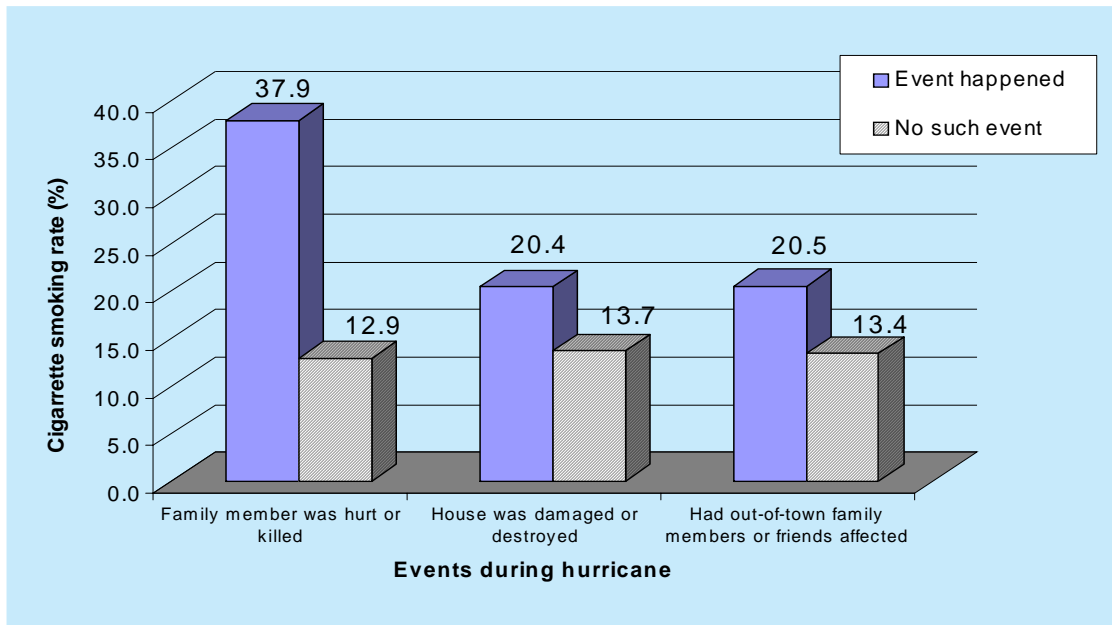
A comparison of smoking rates by hurricane related event showed that having a family member hurt or killed significantly increased cigarette smoking rates. Close to 38% of students who reported they had a family member hurt or killed also reported they were currently smoking (that is, had a cigarette in the past 30 days) compared to a smoking rate of only 13% among students who did not experience such an event. Current cigarette smoking rates were also higher when students' homes were damaged or destroyed and when they had out-of-town family members or friends affected by the hurricane. In addition, students who were still living in temporary

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housing and who were absent from school for more than 2 months due to the hurricanes were 2 times more likely to report that they were current smokers compared to students who did not report such experiences.

Current Cigarette Smoking Rates Among Middle and High School Students Affected by Hurricane-Related Events



Implications for Community Programs

This study documents increased cigarette smoking among students who experienced specific hurricane related events – harm to family and friends, damage to their homes, still living in temporary housing at the time of the survey, or absence from school more than 2 months. The data suggest that youth smoking rates have increased following the 2005 hurricanes in Jefferson County. This will need to be considered in future program planning and evaluation.

Large scale disasters, including those caused by fires, tornados, hurricanes and floods, result not only in property damage, but also in psychological trauma. When people are affected by traumatic events they report increased symptoms of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Children and youth may respond by acting out or taking part in unhealthy behaviors such as tobacco use.

It is important for adults working with youth in schools and health care settings to first recognize the long lasting effects of traumatic events and to help students (and their parents) develop healthy coping skills to counter use to tobacco.

For More Information on responding to psychological needs following a natural disaster, see Psychological First Aid: Field Operations Guide at <http://www.ncptsd.va.gov>

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