



Rapid Assessments of Temporary Housing Camps For Hurricane-Displaced Children and Families July 2006

INTRODUCTION

Transitional housing for Hurricane Katrina evacuees presents a variety of physical and social hazards for the children who live there. And, despite the temporary housing label, it will long remain a risky and disruptive environment unless action is taken now to remedy the situation. In addition, current policy must change so that displaced populations are not simply given shelter but are provided with safe and protective communities that promote recovery after a disaster.

Housing as many people as possible on the space available with little regard for the needs of children has become the *de facto* standard operating procedure, dating back over six presidential administrations and continuing through Hurricanes Andrew (2002), Charley (2004) and Katrina (2005). However, mass-displacement camps are some of the most dangerous and unhealthy places in the world for people to live. As Save the Children knows from decades of experience, poorly planned camps will lead to a deterioration of social conditions and put already vulnerable children further at risk.

In February and March 2006, Save the Children conducted a rapid assessment of conditions in 20 camps in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama that raised a variety of concerns and reinforced our understanding of how best to protect children in post-crisis situations. Since then, efforts have been made to correct some problems in temporary camps. However, more can be done to ensure that children displaced by the hurricane have a safe place to live, a nurturing environment to learn and a true community within which to thrive.

Rapid assessments are snapshots: They reflect the stories, concerns, priorities and reality of daily life in the camps as communicated by residents. The assessments are not an exploration of the U.S. system of emergency management and human services, nor are the findings meant as indictments against any agency or organization. Rather, they allow for insight into conditions and provide the opportunity to address unmet needs.

This summary includes recommendations to mitigate risks to children and their families now and in future U.S. disasters.

DEMOGRAPHY

Not all people displaced by Hurricane Katrina were impoverished. It is simply the impoverished who have the greatest difficulty recovering from such an event. And it is the women, disabled, elderly and the children who are most vulnerable and who ultimately suffer most.

As of September 14, 2005, residents of 76 counties and parishes in Mississippi, Louisiana and Alabama were designated eligible for federal assistance — a basic guideline for determining areas most severely affected by the storm. FEMA reports that 36,504 individuals were affected by flooding alone. Countless others were affected by sustained high winds, rain, flooding and hurricane-related tornados.

At the time of the storm, according to the U.S. Census Bureau:

- In the 10 Alabama counties designated disaster areas, an average of 26 percent of the under-18 population lived below the poverty level; countywide poverty rates were as high as 36 percent;
- In the 19 Louisiana parishes receiving the designation, an average of 23 percent of the under-18 population lived below the poverty level while countywide poverty rates were as high as 34 percent;
- In the 47 Mississippi counties designated disaster areas, an average of 27 percent of the under-18 population lived below the poverty level, and countywide poverty rates were as high as 36 percent.

THE FINDINGS

Physical Environment

- Throughout the 20 sites, housing density was a consistent complaint of both children and adults. Residents attributed rising tensions within the camp community, in part, to overcrowding. They also cited cramped living conditions as a major stressor that led to conflict within the family.
- Transportation is one of the greatest challenges for Katrina's displaced families. Many camp residents have either never owned or needed a vehicle or have since lost their car. They are dependent on public transportation to get to work, health facilities and other services. The not atypical Cash Point RV Park outside of Bossier City, La., is located 7.8 miles from the nearest marked bus stop and approximately 7.5 miles to the nearest hospital or major grocery store.
- Commercial sites generally offer more green space and recreational area, and trailers tend to be less densely situated. New families are integrated with other residents rather than isolated. Newly formed group sites, however, are often bleak and unwelcoming. For example, Zirlott Park (Alabama) is dominated by broad roads and is without vegetation. The children have no playground but can see a ball field through a recently installed chain-link fence.
- Community can play an important role in improving the camp environment and relationships with host populations, but community is noticeably absent. Only three of 20 sites provide a tent or space for communal gatherings, programs or activities for children or religious services. The lack of communal space limits interaction among community members and hinders the ability to organize and attract services, thereby adding to the further deterioration of quality of life for and the safety and security of children.
- Renaissance Village (Baton Rouge, La.), still the largest of the post-Katrina trailer camps and home to about 300 children displaced by Hurricane Katrina, exemplifies many problems inherent in camps built for evacuees. It is characterized by insufficient pedestrian-scale lighting; the presence of debris and other hazards; an absence of community centers and other safe spaces for social interaction and after-school programming; wide passages that facilitate dangerous driving and put children at risk; a lack of defined pedestrian areas; and the existence of especially unsafe areas, such as unlit wooded areas and outlying laundry rooms that may provide opportunity for sexual predators.

Child-Protection Issues

- Many children are not attending school. Parents cited treatment by school officials and other students, unfamiliarity with the neighborhood and difficulty related to relocations as reason for non-attendance. Transportation problems and difficulties with peers also were contributing to non-attendance.
- The hurricane and its aftermath separated children from their parents in 11 of 20 sites. In Picayune, Miss., two residents reported sending their children to live with relatives elsewhere due to conditions in the camp. Anecdotally, camp residents said that many people are separated from their children for reasons that include: transportation, quality of life, separation during rescue and sheltering after the storm, post-storm divorces and inaccessibility of medical care.
- Children are vulnerable to crime and physical and sexual abuse. Drug abuse and dealing were reported in nine sites. A feeling of tension and reports of violence were registered in seven and eight sites, respectively. Theft and prostitution were reported in six sites. Alcohol abuse, domestic violence and poor relationships with the local community were reported at five sites. Interviewees at five sites said they were concerned about suspicious neighbors. Residents at four sites reported sexual assaults/rapes; and, residents at three sites report having known sexual predators living at their site.
- Residents from across the camps reported changes in their children's behavior. Parents cited apparent boredom in seven sites, fighting in five sites, and crying and irritability in four sites. Depression, weight change, "acting out" and a change in school performance were each reported in three sites. Change to sleep patterns was reported in one site.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Creating a positive and protective environment for children

The lack of a community leaves children and their families at risk and vulnerable. Building trust in temporary communities creates a safe environment for children but also nurtures self-help for adults. People who have met and know each other can work together on commonly identified goals that benefit the community. This type of trust building needs to occur both inside the camps as well as between the camp residents and local towns. Encouraging adults to integrate into the local community and learn about job training, transportation, economic opportunities and educational opportunities for children will ultimately expedite their transition out of temporary housing communities.

Issues of overcrowding, unsafe environments and alienation from surrounding communities put children further at risk. However, safe and protective communities are still possible for Katrina evacuees if they have support and are enabled to help themselves, and if a number of important measures are taken, including:

- **Creating a meeting space for parents and children.** Residents of temporary housing camps need a meeting area—for adults to gather as well as for children’s clubs and, potentially, for child care. Ideally, this would entail a double-wide trailer with accompanying tents for children’s activities during the summer and after school. Communal space should also be available for the host community to meet with camp residents. Job boards, camp/school notices and other information posted there would ultimately help residents to help themselves.
- **Ensuring the provision of basic activities.** Parents and children need productive social activities. Individuals within the community and local community groups could provide these services. Children should be provided with games and materials for child play and to encourage activities between children and adults. These activities support children’s development but also encourage expression, exercise and a healthy lifestyle.
- **Improving the physical environment.** Having been moved many times, many displaced people do not feel they have control over their lives or environment. Small grants should be made to communities to allow residents to address issues such as lighting, ramps, signage for children, playgrounds, flowers, murals and social events. All of these would increase the security of the camps as well as give residents control over their environment. Other grants could be given to youth groups to undertake similar activities.
- **Linking residents with state and local resources.** Residents feel cut off from public resources that could facilitate their recovery. A focus on connecting them with these resources is critical.
- **Addressing transportation concerns.** A key concern for many in the rural displaced communities is the lack of transportation to the nearest city. Many residents have no vehicle and cannot address basic needs (e.g., laundry, grocery shopping, post office and medical appointments). Residents cannot find and retain employment without transportation.
- **Facilitating integration into local communities.** Local officials and nonprofit organizations should facilitate activities between the displaced and host communities. Ideally, these would focus on addressing problems common to both communities. Strengthening the bonds between two communities could support the displaced and allow for local assimilation. Youth-serving organizations should facilitate young people gathering together for positive activities such as sports or music events.
- **Improving school integration.** Schools are often sources of tension for the children of host and displaced communities. To address this situation, qualified nonprofits should work with children, teachers and principals and identify appropriate solutions, for example: tolerance education programs, integration programming and support for teachers.

Implementing change and building community now

In July 2006, Save the Children will begin working with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) on the “Safe and Protective Communities” project. Starting with a pilot project in one Louisiana temporary housing settlement, Save the Children will launch proven programs to improve the living environment for children and their families. Among planned activities are: establishing safe play areas for children and a meeting space for adults; facilitating community meetings; collaborating with local private and public organizations to address the recovery and social needs of camp residents; and identifying and funding youth-focused community projects. Plans are to replicate this model in other camps in Louisiana and Mississippi over the coming year. In each area, Save the Children intends to partner with local governments and service providers.

Planning ahead for future disasters

Children are among the most vulnerable members of society, especially during a crisis. While addressing the needs of children who live along the Gulf Coast is an immediate priority, this is also the time to ensure that they are not lost in the process the next time the United States faces a major disaster.

Emergency plans should integrate children's issues—from their basic security and well-being in temporary shelters to the continuation of their education—and should include programs that protect children and assist them through the aftermath of a crisis, into recovery and back to stable communities. The roles and responsibilities of federal, state and local government agencies, as well as local organizations, should be well-delineated.

At the federal level, government agencies should develop specific posts and working groups to address the needs of children in emergencies. Such agencies would include FEMA, the Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Education, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services and the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Also, internationally accepted standards for humanitarian assistance should be recognized and used to guide the U.S. response to disasters. These include the *SPHERE Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response* and the *INEE Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies, Chronic Crises and Early Reconstruction*.



THE METHODOLOGY

In assessing the range of camp situations, Save the Children visited 20 sites across Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. The sites had a combined estimated population of 2,595 households and ranged in size from as few as 12 to as many as 600 occupied trailers. Sites were located in both urban and rural settings: Some were located in the heart of town and formed an integral part of the surrounding community, while others sat miles from communities and services. We visited sites just beginning to fill with residents, those at maximum capacity with no indication of slowing, and others near closing. Whenever possible, we visited sites of different types within a single area, for purposes of controlled comparison.

The assessments consisted of two phases. The first was an appraisal of the built environment and other physical components, based on observation. Each site was surveyed, the activity of residents noted. Among factors investigated were: housing density and layout, level of debris/trash, availability of green space and recreational areas, safety of units (e.g., whether they were on blocks, had straps, etc.), lighting, sewage services, security, thoroughfares (and the safety thereof) and the availability of public transportation. The status of children was a primary focus. When not prohibited, photographs of the sites were taken.

The second phase consisted of one-on-one and group interviews and discussions with camp residents and others. We interviewed primary informants at length. In internally displaced person (IDP) and refugee situations abroad, humanitarian workers have greater access to the populations at hand and gather focus groups to rapidly assess camp life. For a range of reasons—lack of community space, distrust, absence of community leaders and general inaccessibility to community members, especially children—this proved difficult in the post-Katrina context. Instead, we most often turned to serial in-depth interviews with people from many segments of camp life. Those interviewed included residents charged with caring for children, site administrators, security guards, providers of on-site services (e.g., cafeteria workers), social workers, children and government representatives. Security guards in particular proved invaluable through their constant presence and observation of the community. With a mix of one-on-one and group interviews, we were able to readily detect trends in camps.

Save the Children staff often spent entire days in camps. We were invited into homes and could observe living conditions and their implications. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) *Priority Issues for Refugee Children* was used as a baseline for interviews.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report was principally researched and written by Shane Townsend of Save the Children and Nathalie Dajko of the Tulane University Department of Anthropology.