



The Real Crisis of Katrina

The real crisis from Katrina is coming. It is more relentless and more powerful than the flood waters in New Orleans; more destructive than the 150 mile an hour winds of Katrina. It will destroy a part of our country that is much more valuable than all of the buildings, pipelines, casinos, bridges and roads in all of the Gulf Coast. Over our lifetime, this crisis will cost our society billions upon billions of dollars. And the echoes of the coming crisis will haunt the next generation.

This crisis is foreseeable. And, much of its destructive impact is preventable. Yet our society may not have the wisdom to see that the real crisis of Katrina is the hundreds of thousands of ravaged, displaced and traumatized children. And our society may not have the will to prevent this crisis. We understand broken buildings; we do not understand broken children.

We will spend billions of dollars rebuilding the roads, bridges, buildings, pipelines, oil rigs, casinos and houses. Will we spend billions healing these children? We will spend billions to reclaim New Orleans. Will we spend billions to reclaim the potential of these children?

The future of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast does not depend on structures. Our future depends on our children. If we do not provide the safe, nurturing, predictable and enriched experiences these children need and if we do not arm our caregivers, educators and mental health providers with the tools they need to understand, engage, educate and heal traumatized children all these new buildings will be filled with struggling children growing into adulthood expressing only a fraction of their true potential.

We know that traumatic experiences can result in a host of chronic, sometimes, life-long, problems. More than 35 % of the children exposed to a single traumatic event will develop serious mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). That is just the start, however. Children exposed to adverse experiences are at much greater risk for physical health problems throughout life; this includes heart disease, diabetes and hypertension. Traumatized children are at much greater risk for other emotional, social and mental health problems; and as these children grow into adults the risk follows them. Adults with childhood trauma have increased divorce rates, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, alcoholism, drug abuse and dependence, school failure, and unemployment among many other problems. These children have a much higher probability of requiring the services of our expensive public systems throughout life; special education, child protection, mental health, health and criminal justice.

And we also know that when traumatized children receive appropriate services, they can heal. We know that if traumatized children can live in safe, consistent, relationally-rich, and nurturing homes and communities they heal. Indeed, traumatic experience can provide a wisdom and strength that is impossible to get any other way. Yet this healing takes place and wisdom grows only when the child is safe, secure and her emotional needs have been met.

If we do not help these children, what has been lost will pale in comparison to what could be lost. The potential creativity, productivity and humanity of thousands of these children are at risk. Will

we spend the same attention and dedicate the same economic and personal resources to help these children that we will in rebuilding infrastructure? I doubt it.

Our society's true view of children is reflected in the already under-funded, overwhelmed public services working with children; education, child mental health, early childhood services, child care, child protection – all are under funded and overwhelmed by the existing needs of children. This flood of need spreads far beyond the streets of New Orleans. Even before Katrina we were drowning our front-line child care providers, our educators, our child welfare workers and our mental health providers. In all of the effected communities and in each of the communities stepping up to help these families the existing educational, health, mental health and social services are already barely meeting the needs of the children they serve. To these overwhelmed services we will be adding hundreds of thousands of children – displaced, overwhelmed, distressed and traumatized. We need to help these systems and these providers so they can help these children.

These needs can be met. Addressing the coming crisis will require leadership, energy, wisdom, money and time. We need compassion *and* knowledge; kindness and good intentions will not solve these problems. We need to build trauma-informed systems; early childhood, child care, education, law enforcement, health, mental health, child protection and juvenile justice are all profoundly impacted by traumatized children. Further, we need to educate our policy makers, parents and caregivers about the impact of trauma on children. The more we all understand the effects and impact of traumatic events the easier it will be to prevent and buffer these effects. And for those children who do develop serious mental health problems we need to have trauma-informed mental health services available; we need far more trained providers than we currently have. And we need to know more about preventing and healing trauma-related emotional, behavioral, social, cognitive and physical problems; therefore we need to fund and conduct much more research.

In short we need to give our children the same attention and resources we give our roads, bridges, pipelines and infrastructure. The health, productivity and creativity of a society are renewed each generation through its children. The society that understands and acts on this will succeed; the society that does not is doomed to fail. Let us not fail these children. Let us not fail ourselves.

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For more information on what you can do to help understand and respond to the impact of Katrina on children please visit The ChildTrauma Academy website; www.ChildTrauma.org. The ChildTrauma Academy staff is preparing a set of support materials for various sets of responders. This includes materials for first responders, families, children and teachers impacted by Hurricane Katrina.
