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Corporate Headquarters
1776 Main Street
P.O. Box 2138
Santa Monica, California
90407-2138
TEL 310.393.0411
FAX 310.393.4818

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How Schools Responded to Student Mental Health Needs Following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita

In 2005, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita displaced hundreds of thousands of children in the U.S. Gulf Coast region and exposed many more to stressful events, such as injury, homelessness, and the loss of loved ones. Schools in the region played a role in helping students cope with this trauma by providing mental health services. This study examined how schools in the Gulf region perceived the mental health needs of students after the hurricanes and how schools responded. RAND researchers interviewed school personnel in Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas, Alabama, Florida, and Arkansas. The following were among the key findings:

- In the acute phase of recovery, schools generally made a rapid, coordinated effort to help students settle into new schools. A small number of schools, mostly in larger districts, took steps to prepare staff for dealing with the potential mental health needs of displaced students and other students exposed to trauma.
- Over the longer term (six months or more after the storms), school responses varied. Some schools did not perceive the need to continue providing mental health support and refocused on their academic missions. Other schools identified a need for mental health support and responded by implementing trauma-focused programs and providing one-on-one counseling. Still other schools perceived student mental health needs but encountered barriers to delivering services.
- Among the barriers cited were (1) difficulties communicating with parents, (2) inadequate resources, (3) insufficient staff training, (4) burnout among staff or personnel charged with implementing programs, and (5) difficulties balancing the needs of displaced students with the ongoing needs of preexisting students.

School experiences with the aftermath of hurricanes Katrina and Rita underscore the need for better planning and training to respond to the mental health dimension of natural disasters. Despite significant efforts to meet the mental health needs of students affected by the hurricanes, many schools were limited in their ability to implement disaster-focused programs. The study suggests that districts and schools would benefit from extending crisis plans to include precrisis training in mental health programs for students and for staff who have ongoing difficulties after a disaster.

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