Why am I receiving this report?

This community report of the Gulf Coast Population Impact Project is being mailed to households who participated in our survey, to participants who met with us in small-group meetings, and to other residents and stakeholders who have expressed an interest in this work.

About Us

The National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University is dedicated to understanding and improving the nation’s capacity to prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters. We have worked on studies looking at 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, the Joplin tornado, and the Deepwater Horizon oil spill.

For further information about the Gulf Coast Population Impact Project you may contact study director David Abramson, PhD, at ncdp@columbia.edu. The views expressed in this Community Report are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect those of the funder.

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The 1,437 parents whom we surveyed reported considerable exposure to the oil spill as well as a number of physical and mental health problems among their children. The key findings were:

**Exposure to the oil spill:** Over half of the parents interviewed in these highly-impacted communities reported that their children had some type of oil spill-related exposure, whether it was through physical, environmental, or economic factors. One in every five parents said their children had direct contact with the oil; one in four reported smelling strong oil-related odors; and two of every five said their household had lost income or a job since the oil spill.

**Health effects:** A little over 40% of parents in these highly-impacted communities reported some type of health effect experienced by their children since the oil spill. About one in five parents said their children had experienced breathing problems and a similar number reported emotional or behavioral issues. One in seven reported skin problems.

**Exposure matters:** All other things being equal – regardless as to where people live, how much money they make, or whether or not they have health insurance and a family doctor for their children – parents who reported that their children had been directly exposed to the oil spill or dispersants were three times as likely to report new physical or mental health problems among their children when compared to those parents who reported that their children had not been exposed. Parents in households that had lost income or a job since the spill were nearly twice as likely to report new physical and mental health problems among their children.

**Participants spoke of medical issues and lack of access to high-quality pediatric care, particularly specialty and mental health care. Parents talked of children experiencing chronic headaches, nosebleeds, ear bleeding, unexplained skin rashes, and early and heavy menstrual periods among young girls, all of which seemed to have emerged since the oil spill.**

Many people described the rising economic pressures on families and the impact on children. We heard many stories of parents unable to meet their family’s need for food, clothing, or shelter, and of how this has led to parental depression. Many children are unsupervised after school, left to care for younger siblings or at risk for harmful behaviors. Community leaders and parents thought that teenage pregnancies and drug use were on the rise. There was also a consistent concern about dwindling recreational opportunities for children.

Some, but not all of the problems we heard about were attributable to the oil spill. Many communities regarded the oil spill as an additional stress added to so many others, including Hurricanes Katrina and Isaac, the economic recession, and chronic poverty.

**What do the children of the Gulf need?** Gulf Coast children need what all children need – stable and supportive homes, opportunities for play and growth, access to high-quality health care and education, and a healthy environment. Solutions proposed in our small-group discussions included: greater access to mental health and specialty care for children; improved opportunities for after-school recreational and educational support programs; and economic opportunities, job training and mental health support for parents and youth in coastal communities.