

HEALTH CHALLENGES FOR THE PEOPLE OF NEW ORLEANS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Before August 29, 2005, many in the New Orleans area faced significant health care challenges, and Louisiana consistently reported some of the poorest health statistics in the country. Katrina's levee breaches brought waters that washed away essential components of the health care system and left many health challenges for residents in the aftermath of the storm.

As policymakers at the federal, state and local level grapple with the challenges presented by Hurricane Katrina and the levee breaches, there is an overwhelming need for accurate, reliable data to guide their decisions. This report focuses on the health care challenges facing people living in the New Orleans area after Hurricane Katrina. It serves as a companion piece to the Foundation's May 2007 report, *Giving Voice to the People of New Orleans: the Kaiser Post-Katrina Baseline Survey*, delving more deeply into the health care status of residents and how they are using the health care services in place after the disaster.

The Kaiser Family Foundation conducted this household survey in the fall of 2006 to give voice to the people of New Orleans and supply policymakers with a source of information about who is returning to the New Orleans area and how they are faring, highlighting the health needs of the population and the challenges they encounter in the face of an uncertain future. This survey provides valuable information about adults currently living in the Greater New Orleans area (Orleans, Jefferson, Plaquemines, and St. Bernard Parishes) —those who remained in the area and those who have returned.

Key Findings

Health Status

As policymakers and planners look to restore the health care system in the Greater New Orleans area, it is critical that they have an understanding of the health status of the population that has returned or relocated to the area since the storm. Though some of the sickest and most vulnerable former residents of the area may not have yet been able to return, adults in the area are still facing considerable challenges to their physical and mental health after Katrina.

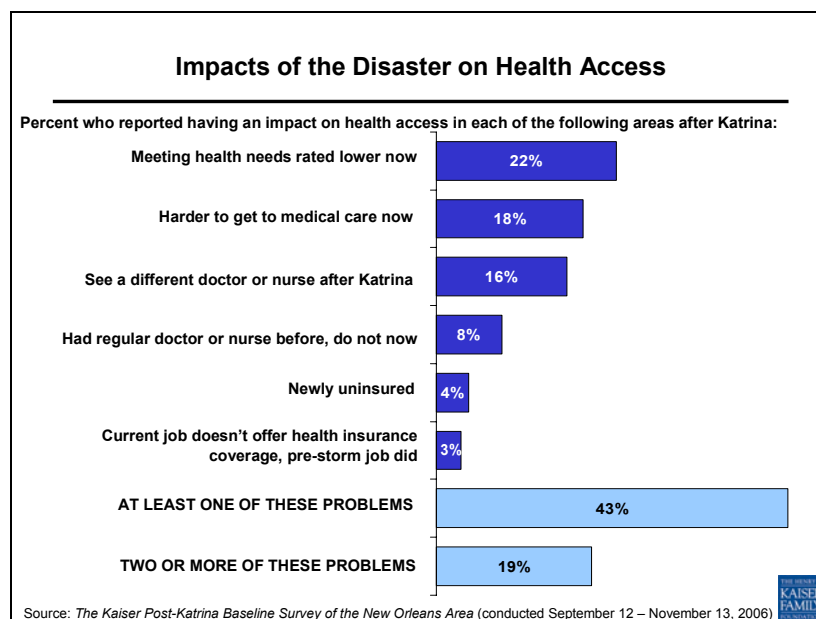
- More than one in ten adults (13%) ranked their overall health as fair or poor, which is a good indicator of the need for current and future medical attention.
- Among the economically disadvantaged, health problems were more common. One in five economically disadvantaged adults (19%) ranked their health as fair or poor, significantly higher than those with better economic status (9%).
- The differences in health status by source of health coverage were even more pronounced. The uninsured were more than twice as likely as those with private coverage to report being in fair or poor health (15% vs. 6%), and the elderly covered by Medicare and the poor covered by Medicaid were more than three times as likely to report being in fair or poor health (23% and 21% respectively).
- Chronic conditions were also widespread, with over four in ten (41%) adults responding that they had been told by a doctor that they had hypertension, diabetes, asthma or other breathing problems, or other chronic health conditions.
- Mental health challenges were also evident for adults, with about one in twelve adults (8%) ranking their mental health as fair or poor. Our survey found about one in twenty adults reporting symptoms of depression (6%) or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (5%).

Though many adults across the region were facing physical and mental health problems, certain subgroups were disproportionately burdened by poor health status. Health disparities for African Americans persisted in the New Orleans area. The elderly in the area had high rates of health problems, as is the case nationally—two thirds (66%) of those over 65 in the area were living with a chronic condition or disability. As noted, the economically disadvantaged and the uninsured had relatively higher rates of physical and mental health problems, and these groups had the added difficulty of accessing the care they needed with fewer available personal resources and the loss of safety net facilities that existed before the storm.

Health Coverage, Access, and Utilization

The flooding from levee breaches associated with Hurricane Katrina had a profound impact on the availability of health care services in the New Orleans area. At the time of the survey over one year after the hurricane, six of sixteen major hospitals in the region were still not operating, and many of those that had opened were at reduced capacity from pre-Katrina levels. The Medical Center of Louisiana at New Orleans (MCLNO, formerly Charity Hospital) remained closed, with limited clinic services available at a former downtown department store, which made accessing health care particularly difficult for the low-income and uninsured populations who used to rely on Charity. The University Hospital campus of MCLNO opened with limited capacity as an interim hospital shortly after the survey was concluded. Many health care providers had also left the area, creating workforce shortages to treat the remaining population.

In light of the diminished health resources available after the storm, it is perhaps not surprising that the survey found significant health coverage, access and utilization problems facing adults in the area a year after the storm. Overall, 43% of adults in the population reported their access to health care and coverage was affected in the aftermath of the storm, with 18% saying it was harder to get to their place of medical care now.



Adults in the area continued to face health coverage, access, and utilization problems, and the vulnerable groups disproportionately burdened by poor health status were also among those facing the greatest hurdles in accessing care.

- The uninsured rate continued to remain high—a quarter of non-elderly adults (25%) in the Greater New Orleans area lacked health insurance, with rates even higher among vulnerable subgroups of the population such as the economically disadvantaged and African Americans.
- With more limited health coverage, adults had a difficult time accessing the care they need in an efficient setting. Over a quarter of adults (27%) in the area did not have a usual source of care other than an emergency room.
- A quarter (25%) of the population had visited an emergency room in the past six months. At the same time, fewer than four in ten (38%) had received routine or preventive care in the past six months.
- Those who formerly relied on the Charity Hospital system (9% of adults in the area) were facing added challenges accessing health care. Over half of this population was uninsured (56%) and more than six in ten (61%) reported having no usual source of care other than the emergency room.
- About one in twelve adults (8%) in the Greater New Orleans area had delayed or not gotten needed medical care in the past six months. The percentage was three times as high (19%) among adults in fair or poor health status compared to those who reported better health (6%), despite the pressing need for prompt medical attention for this population.

Findings from this survey document that previous users of the Charity Hospital system, together with the broader uninsured and Medicaid populations, were disproportionately impacted by Katrina's devastation. But they were not alone. Hospital closures and the loss of medical professionals have affected nearly everyone who lives in post-Katrina New Orleans. Indeed, the storms of 2005 had a leveling effect across many health access and utilization measures, creating new access to care barriers for many still living in the region.

Impact on Children

Disasters can have a particularly strong impact on children. Children tend to thrive on a regular routine, and the disruption that follows a disaster can cause them to feel scared and angry and to manifest changes in behavior, such as increased violence or withdrawal from relationships. Our survey asked respondents to describe some of the challenges children in their household were facing. In the wake of the Katrina disaster, one in twelve households with children (8%) in the area reported a child was suffering from borderline or abnormal emotional and behavioral health symptoms.

Despite the disruption to their lives and the challenges of life in post-Katrina New Orleans, children in families of all races and income levels are back in the area. As these children cope with physical and mental health conditions after the disaster, access to medical care is important in promoting stability and health. Though the majority of children have received routine health care, timely access to health services could be improved, particularly for vulnerable children most in need of medical care.

The important role that public coverage through Medicaid and LaCHIP plays in helping children in the New Orleans area get the health care they need is clear, as more than four in ten households with children in the area (42%) have a child on one of the programs. Only 9% of households reported having an uninsured child, a comparable rate for both African American and white households. More than twice as many African American households with children as white households have a child on Medicaid or LaCHIP (61% vs. 28%), highlighting the importance of these programs in reducing racial disparities in coverage and care and giving children a healthy start in life.

Moving Forward

The findings from this baseline survey provide an in-depth portrait of the health challenges facing those living in the New Orleans area over one year after the storm. As is clear from the data, significant hurdles face the residents of the area and also the policymakers charged with rebuilding and improving the health system for them. Louisiana's efforts to expand health coverage, broaden access to primary and preventive care, and recruit health care workforce to the area are a step toward addressing the needs described in this report. Though slow progress continues to be made in restoring health care services in the area, this report indicates that much work remains to be done.

In addition to the findings from this report and the May 2007 report, which are both based upon data from the *Kaiser Post-Katrina Baseline Survey of the New Orleans Area*, the Foundation plans to follow up with two more surveys in the coming years to aid in the evaluation of progress made in restoring health care services and to continue to give voice to the people of the New Orleans area. The Foundation is committed to revisiting these and any new issues that arise in New Orleans in the next phase of the Kaiser post-Katrina survey project.

Note on Methodology

The *Kaiser Post-Katrina Baseline Survey of the New Orleans Area* was designed and analyzed by researchers at the Kaiser Family Foundation. This in-person survey was conducted door-to-door from September 12 to November 13, 2006. Interviews were completed in English and Spanish with 1,504 randomly selected adults ages 18 and older residing in Orleans, Jefferson, Plaquemines, and St. Bernard Parishes. These four neighboring parishes make up Region 1 as defined by Louisiana's Department of Health and Hospitals, an administrative region used for recovery planning. The sample design was a stratified area probability sample, with 456 sampling points distributed proportionate to expected population size in each of the four parishes, and in each of 14 Census tract-defined neighborhoods in Orleans Parish. An oversample was drawn in Orleans to allow for more detailed analysis of this area; final results have been weighted so that each parish reflects its estimated share of the area's population. The margin of sampling error for the full sample is plus or minus 4 percentage points; for results based on Orleans Parish or Jefferson Parish, it is plus or minus 5 percentage points. For results based on other subsets of respondents, the margin of sampling error may be higher. ICR/International Communications Research collaborated with Kaiser researchers on sample design and weighting, and supervised the fieldwork. More detail on survey methodology is available in Appendix C of this report. The full questionnaire and topline are available as Appendix E of the May 2007 report, *Giving Voice to the People of New Orleans: The Kaiser Post-Katrina Baseline Survey*, available at <http://www.kff.org/kaiserpolls/pomr051007pkg.cfm>.