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The Invisible Injury: When the Hurricane Comes and Stays

Written by Associate Commissioner Aysha E. Schomburg

I can't stop thinking about the children whose lives have been upended by Hurricane Ida. As I write this, I know that there are children in many parts of this country who should be getting ready for school tomorrow, but instead they are trying to figure out when or even if they will return to school. They may even be trying to figure out where they will sleep or where their family will live in the coming days. If they are in a shelter, they may wonder if that shelter will be safe for them and provide them with the resources they need. I can't stop thinking about the trauma their small brains are experiencing and whether they—or the adults around them—are even aware of it. The child victims of Ida are not unlike the child victims of Hurricanes Katrina, Sandy, or Maria. They are not unlike the child victims of the wildfires that have devastated the western states of this nation.

According to the 2015 National Report Card on Protecting Children in Disasters, after Katrina, more than 300,000 children were forced to enroll in new schools around the country. By some accounts, settling in new schools wasn't safe for evacuees; they were treated as outsiders and accused of soaking up resources that were designated for resident families. Superstorm Sandy ripped through the northeast and left children homeless or without heat and power. Many schools were practically destroyed, and students were required to squeeze into otherwise already overcrowded schools. According to [one study](#) regarding youth in Puerto Rico, 32 percent of youth experienced shortages of food and water in the aftermath of Maria. Natural disasters have left children without homes, without schools, without power, and without enough food and water. To make matters worse, I've read recently that long-term exposure to smoke from the wildfires is especially damaging to a child's lungs. That same [article](#) pointed out that "it matters whether your family can afford an air purifier." Recovery economics is an issue.

I'm worried about the children who survive the disaster but can't defeat the posttraumatic stress. Not surprisingly, those most impacted are children in underserved communities—Black and Brown children living in poverty with insecure housing. We rush to provide them with basic necessities during the first few weeks, then the news cycle moves on. I still wonder if they truly have access to all that they need. For so many children, after the temporary wind and the rain, what remains is the permanent tornado within. There is stifling trauma that suffocates their ability to succeed. When the water dries and debris removed from the streets, are we tending to the wounds left behind that only they can feel? Are we acutely aware of the lingering invisible injury? Are we fully invested in disaster recovery when the hurricane comes and stays? I'm not sure we are doing enough.

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