



# STILL AT RISK: CHILDREN ONE YEAR AFTER HURRICANE HARVEY

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Harvey Hit Hard

Hurricane Harvey was the most powerful storm to hit Texas in 50 years. Nearly 3 million children were affected by the catastrophic storm, which displaced more than 1 million people and damaged hundreds of thousands of homes in a path of destruction that stretched 300 miles.

Harvey was a hard-hitting storm and impacted the most vulnerable, our children, the hardest. The hurricane disrupted children from the get-go, making it impossible to start the 2017–18 school year on time. At least 1.4 million children – nearly 60 percent of whom are in low-income families – across 117 school districts in the Gulf Coast region missed

at least one week of school due to Harvey-related closures. All schools in Houston Independent School District were closed for two full weeks, and many children were out of child care for significantly longer periods of time. Families were displaced for weeks on end, some never to return, and homes and belongings were lost. Hurricane Harvey is on record as the second costliest tropical cyclone, behind Hurricane Katrina, to ever impact America, with an estimated \$125 billion in damages. What's more, for many Texas children, feelings of safety, innocence and a desire to play – the essence of what it means to be a child – were lost because of Harvey, too.



PHOTO CREDIT: SUSAN WARNER FOR SAVE THE CHILDREN

**Now is the time to act – in Houston, in Texas, and across the nation – to better protect children in disasters.**

## Children's Unique Needs

Children have unique needs that make them the most vulnerable in a disaster. Our youngest children, infants and toddlers may require special food and supplies. They may have trouble verbalizing who they are, their parents' names, or where they live, which can hinder family reunification if separated by disaster. In addition, children haven't fully developed coping mechanisms and techniques to deal with trauma, and rely on the cues and support of their caregivers to cope.

Disaster is scary for children and incredibly stressful for parents – connecting with insurance agents and adjustors and the government for assistance. Parents might not have the ability to fully support their child's feelings in the earliest hours of disaster, which further impacts children. Children need the routine of child care or school to help them feel safe and nurture their development, but when these educational services are inaccessible, learning and normalcy is lost. Without the right supports, a disaster can negatively affect children for the rest of their lives.

Children rely on us, but Hurricane Harvey again proves that we are underprepared to best protect them.

## Bellwethers of Resilience

Research from the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at the Earth Institute at Columbia University shows that children can be considered bellwethers of resilience. How children cope with and recover from a disaster is a strong indicator of how the community will bounce back. That's because when a community is prepared and well positioned to take care of both its children and the services that care and provide for children, it's ready and able to take care of itself. It takes a whole community working together – government, businesses, schools, community organizations – to ensure that when disaster strikes, children's needs will be met.

In terms of practice, we still have a long way to go. Save the Children's 2015 National Disaster Report Card showed that 79 percent of the recommendations made in 2010 by the National Commission on Children and Disasters – based on lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina – remain unfulfilled. While progress continues, it is slow, and implementation at the state and local levels is scattered and disjointed because of a lack of awareness and insufficient resources and funding.

Hurricane Harvey is not an anomaly, as researchers predict disasters will become more frequent and even more severe in future years. Now is the time to act – in Houston, in Texas, and across the nation – to better protect children in disasters.

# Examining Harvey's Impact on Children

The Hurricane Harvey Children's Recovery Collaborative (HHCRC), led by CHILDREN AT RISK, represents more than 40 child and family-serving agencies from across the nonprofit and public sectors who came together shortly after Harvey's landfall, working together to ensure efficient and effective recovery for all Texas children and families. One year after Harvey, HHCRC, led by CHILDREN AT RISK and Save the Children, is releasing a report that examines the challenges faced by many sectors following the storm, offering specific recommendations to better help children and families in the current phase of recovery and protect children in the lead up to and during the next disaster to hit America. The report examines:

- Evacuation Shelters
- Housing
- Food
- Child Care
- Education
- Health
- Mental Health

Hurricane Harvey revealed gaps for children in emergencies, but also revealed significant resilience across Texas – a community working together in incredible ways to fill gaps, serve children, and meet the needs of the most impacted children and families – and an outpouring of support from across America. In light of the positives, there's still a long way to go for children facing disaster and emergency in the United States.


## HARVEY BY THE NUMBERS

**\$1.25 billion**   
in damage and destruction

 Nearly **3 million** kids  
living in disaster-declared counties

**1.4 million** kids   
missed out on at least one week of school

 **hundreds of thousands**  
of homes damaged

**650+** child care programs   
reported damage or were destroyed

 Nearly **1 in 2** Texas legislators  
represent a community  
impacted by Hurricane Harvey



Special thanks to our Hurricane Harvey Children's Recovery Collaborative partners for their valuable contributions to this report: Avenue CDC, The Center for School Behavioral Health at Mental Health America of Greater Houston, Collaborative for Children, Harris County Public Health, Houston Food Bank, Texas Children's Hospital.

# Recommendations



**ENSURE CHILDREN HAVE A VOICE AT THE EMERGENCY PLANNING TABLE.** Too often children's needs are not represented in state and local emergency planning committees. States should have a Children's Needs Coordinator, such as a representative from the early education or public education sector, as part of their emergency response team, who can take a holistic view in connecting the many multi-disciplinary players responsible for children before, during and after disasters.



**PRIORITIZE CHILDREN IN EMERGENCY FUNDING STREAMS.** States need to dedicate more funding to emergency preparedness, response and recovery, with a specific focus on children. The biggest obstacle to supporting children during disaster responses is inadequate funding. Robust funding and strong accountability structures are required to meet the needs of children. While the United States invests billions of dollars to support emergency preparedness and response, children's needs are overlooked. In fact, of every \$10 in federal emergency preparedness grants, less than one cent goes toward activities targeting children's safety.



**FOCUS ON EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION RESTORATION.** Getting children back to learning environments through child care and school is critical in helping them return to a normal routine and cope with the impact of disaster. Simultaneously, it enables parents to get back to work and revitalizes the local economy. Currently, significant funding gaps exist in education recovery. Schools may be rebuilt, but classroom supplies and educational materials often aren't covered. And currently, FEMA does not provide recovery assistance to private, for-profit child care programs – the majority of early education programs. Child care should be deemed a critical service by the Stafford Act, therefore enabling providers to access these critical recovery dollars.



**TRAIN EDUCATORS ON TRAUMA INFORMED CARE.** The best way to determine an individual's recovery needs is risk screening – especially for children – which enables a personalized plan of care. Trauma should be assessed through a holistic lens, and training of educators, school staff, and behavioral health professionals can help ensure that trauma-informed health treatment is available for all children needing therapeutic services. Educators should have access to trainings on signs and symptoms of trauma, as well as trauma-informed classroom strategies.



**PREPARE FAMILIES.** All disasters are local – and the first line of response is often your own family. Yet, less than half of U.S. families report having an emergency plan. Communities should consider how they can best educate families on home preparedness measures through local communication channels and programs that deliver life-saving information. This includes opportunities to educate children about preparedness and safety skills that they can continue to hone and practice as they grow. Research shows that preparing children before a disaster helps them better respond during the event and cope with the aftermath, because it builds a child's sense of understanding and control.

PHOTO CREDIT: SUSAN WARNER FOR SAVE THE CHILDREN



## READ THE FULL REPORT

Learn more and read **STILL AT RISK: CHILDREN ONE YEAR AFTER HURRICANE HARVEY** when it is released in September, during National Preparedness Month. Visit [childrenatrisk.org/hurricane-harvey](http://childrenatrisk.org/hurricane-harvey) for more.