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Children and the Poor Hurt Worst by Gulf Spill

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Gulf Coast resident Bridget Hargrove and her family wade in pools away from contaminated ocean water in Grand Islae, La., on May 21. (Reuters / Sean Gardner)

The BP oil spill has caused health problems and economic hardship for Gulf Coast residents that may persist after the underwater plumes are dispersed and the tar balls cleaned up. That’s the conclusion of a study published recently by researchers at Columbia’s National Center for Disaster Preparedness (NCDP) at the Mailman

School of Public Health.

Nearly one in five adults who live within 10 miles of the coast say they've experienced skin irritations or respiratory problems that they attribute to the spill. Among parents, more than one-third say that their children have developed rashes and breathing problems, or have become anxious or depressed since the disaster occurred. In total, 43 percent of coastal residents report that they've come into contact with spilled oil or with chemicals used to disperse the slick, either by participating in cleanup efforts or by unexpectedly touching or breathing in the substances near beaches.

The Columbia study is based on interviews with 1200 coastal residents in Louisiana and Mississippi conducted in late July.

"There is a persistent public-health crisis underscored by the large number of children with medical and psychological problems," says lead author Irwin Redlener, a pediatrician who directs the NCDP.

The disaster is affecting livelihoods, too. One in five people say they earn less money now than before the spill, and eight percent say they lost their jobs. Households with incomes under $25,000 were most affected.

Researchers at the NCDP plan to continue following 1000 children and adults. Meanwhile, the Children's Health Fund is sending mobile pediatric units. "There are literally no pediatricians in the lower two-thirds of Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana," says Redlener, who currently serves as president of the Fund. "And this is one of the worst-hit areas."



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