Building Resilience after Disasters through the Youth Leadership Program: The Importance of Community and Academic Partnerships on Youth Outcomes

Howard Osofsky, MD, PhD1, Joy Osofsky, PhD1, Tonya Hansel, PhD, LMSW1, Beverly Lawrason, MEd2, Anthony Speier, PhD1

(1) Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center; (2) St. Bernard School District

What Is the Purpose of the Study?

- The Youth Leadership Program is a school, community, and university partnership designed to better understand the concept of personal resilience and overcoming the mental and emotional components of extreme events such as hurricanes.
- Describe the program and how it was effective in helping youth and communities recover from the most costly hurricane in the history of the United States.
- The current project examined the role of positive activities in school and community settings.
- The importance of leadership through action, as a feature of resilience for personal recovery, begins with engagement of youth.
- Describe and demonstrate features of self-efficacy, and its positive influence on leadership skills, because studying trauma symptoms alone is only part of the recovery equation.

What Is the Problem?

- The impact of natural disasters is frequently studied form the point of view of individual loss.
- Resilience studies tend to focus on the threats to personal resilience, not on ways to increase resilience.
- Rarely is resilience in youth reviewed from the point of view of activities that build and strengthen resilience.
- Displacement of youth into new communities can increase loneliness and lead to the loss of community connectedness.

What Are the Findings?

- This study demonstrates how exposure to hurricanes and the mental health of individual youth influences their perceived capabilities to achieve goals and increase their resilience.
- Youth are exposed to different disaster experiences and vary in the type of trauma symptoms they experience.
- Decreases in trauma symptoms were more likely with increases in self-efficacy.
- Programs like the Youth Leadership Program can address issues of loneliness in displaced students after a major disaster incident.
- The Youth Leadership Program demonstrates the importance of providing leadership opportunities to help student’s personal growth and resilience.
Who Should Care Most?

- Teachers of middle school and high school students.
- School administrators.
- Behavioral health professionals, guidance counselors, and coaches.
- Ministerial alliances.
- Parents and youth.
- Public mental health and social service providers.
- Community leaders.

Recommendations for Action

- Assess the availability of youth leadership programs in local schools.
- Engagement of students into their home, community, and school disaster preparedness plans.
- Establish community mentors and roles for students in the response and recovery aspects of disaster preparation activities.