



# Opinion: Gulf Oil Spill's Silent Victims -- The Children

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(June 28) -- The BP oil spill has garnered international attention for unimaginable real and future losses: lives as well as livelihoods, wildlife and coastal communities. We've learned from the Exxon Valdez and other spills how these catastrophes impact ecosystems, and witnessed the years of rehabilitation and billions of dollars invested in the cleanup.

Yet in weighing these losses, little attention is being given to what this latest man-made disaster will mean to the most vulnerable of our society: our children.

Still evaluating the health effects caused by Hurricane Katrina, we are now hearing reports of oil-spill-related acute respiratory illness among workers on site. How soon until these irritants -- from both the oil and the attempts at dispersion -- start affecting the children of the Gulf Coast?

These children, especially in urban centers like New Orleans, are still recovering from the devastation of Katrina. Even prior to 2005, these families were among the poorest and most dependent on public assistance for health care in the U.S., where access to timely and coordinated treatment was already limited.

Toxicity research has taught us that children are not simply small adults and are already extremely vulnerable to the adverse effects of chemicals. Exposure to environmental chemicals is magnified as children consume more food and water and breathe more air than adults. Children also play close to the ground where contaminants settle and continuously engage in hand-to-mouth behavior, exposing themselves to a vast array of toxins.

Infants are exposed as well to toxins in- and ex-utero based on parental exposures. Newborns differ in their ability to excrete toxins compared with adults, due to developmental differences in respiratory, digestive and urinary system physiology.



These facts are important because BP has dumped more than 800,000 gallons of chemical dispersants into the Gulf of Mexico. Two weeks ago, the Environmental Protection Agency ordered BP to stop using the toxic dispersant Corexit, [stating](#), "We are still deeply concerned about the things we don't know. The long-term effects on aquatic life are still unknown, and we must make sure that the dispersants that are used are as nontoxic as possible." Recently EPA administrator [Lisa Jackson said](#), "I think it's fair to say that when it comes to this volume, we're in uncharted waters."

These comments are deeply disturbing.

Early exposure to toxic chemicals can cause permanent damage to developing organs resulting in lifelong chronic illnesses and disability. Children cannot protect themselves, nor can they clean up an environment our society has created. Independently, they have no political or economic voice. It is our responsibility to ensure that their environment is safe, and we are failing to live up to that responsibility.

One could argue that children, as a group, are victims of environmental injustice; the EPA defines environmental justice as "the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, culture, national origin, income and educational levels with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of protective environmental laws, regulations, and policies." Injustice is done when there exist health disparities based on these same factors. About 13 million children in the U.S. live in families with incomes below the federal poverty level. These rates are on the rise, and they are higher in young children and in African American, Latino American and Native American children. These most "vulnerable of the vulnerable" are disproportionately subjected to a wide range of environmental threats, leading to increasing susceptibility to adverse health outcomes.

While dire predictions prepare us for decades of damage to the ecosystem and the economic impact caused by the spill, the lasting legacy of the BP disaster may well be the effect it has on human health. And it appears once again that very little attention is being devoted to protecting our nation's most precious natural resource.

Poverty and environmental disasters are a catastrophic mix for these children and their families. In addition to being victims of all aspects of environmental injustice, the children of the gulf now are coping with a wave of environmental assaults unparalleled in our country's recent history.

Who will speak for them?

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