

Social Vulnerability In Emergency Management

By: Mike Gipson

Disasters manifest themselves in obvious physical damage to our bodies, our property and the environment around us. Yet just as broken bones, broken structural foundations and broken tree trunks may remind us of the damages caused, oftentimes there are valuable social constructs that are damaged as well. The interpersonal fabric of a community is held together by their social culture. Cities are often described to have their own personalities and the residents of that area are what develop that personality. These personalities are flavored by the festivals, political opinions, civil unrest, history, food traditions, degree of racism and violence, and many other intangible attributes. When a disaster shatters a community, many of those social structures are damaged or changed as well. This can be analyzed by looking at a community's social vulnerability.

FEMA specifies the social vulnerability as the change in "people's behavior" (CDC, 2013, p. 304). The behaviors of a community at risk are seen in numerous predetermined factors, such as: economic status, crime index, general trust in the government, education, and health, to name a few. These factors help Emergency Managers assess the demographics of regions and categorize them by degree of risk in relation to each potential threat. As an example, states like Louisiana and Mississippi have a higher obesity rate than Colorado or California. The culture in those areas contrast in diet and physical activity, putting a large population at risk when immediate evacuation may be necessary. This is why it is imperative that Emergency Managers get to know personally, and even become a part of their community.

Emergency Managers have a direct interest in the improving of their community. Since the largest stakeholder regarding an emergency are the households (Lindell, Perry, Prater, 2006), having a community full of healthy, educated, financially stable and willing people can be considered one of the strongest components to preparedness, mitigation, response, and recovery

of disasters. Those factors may seem subjective at times, which is why the CDC has taken data and given numerical values to the overall social vulnerability of certain regions based on objective “true or false” statements about each citizen.

The CDC has broken up their determining factors into four categories: socioeconomic status, household composition and disability, minority status and language, and housing and transportation. Each category has a series of statements that if found true increases the vulnerability of that individual and subsequently the community that person lives in. These questions include their employment and income, their age and disabilities, language capabilities, home-type, vehicle ownership and more.

The Social Vulnerability Index has proven to be valuable time and time again, encouraging the use and frequent updating that is required for its most efficient use (Cannon, Twigg, Rowell, 2003). Some steps that could be taken by using this information includes coordinating transportation support for communities of people who own less vehicles or translations for communities of people who speak little to know English.

The repercussions of disregarding a social vulnerability of a region under an emergency manager’s jurisdiction could mean loss of life, property or money that could have been prevented. Hurricane Katrina was an event which highlighted the lack of focus on social vulnerabilities. Response seemed to disregard the diversity of the communities affected and showed a generalized response to them all. This often left certain communities or people with special needs without help (Lindell, Perry, Prater, 2006).

Just as disasters and emergencies can vary infinitely, the people affected and the method of response should be just as diverse. The analysis of social vulnerabilities helps emergency

managers adjust and form their method of response to meet the needs of those people.

Emergency plans require the insights of a social vulnerability index and require to be updated just as frequently as the community changes with time.

References

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