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Community Response in a Terrorist Disaster

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SETTING AND METHOD

The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were the largest in the history of the world. For disaster specialists, the attacks involved unique and compounding variables that challenged all aspects of disaster planning and management. First, emergency response and volunteer management organizations saved thousands of lives while facing remarkable circumstances. For example, in New York City, the Emergency Management Office was destroyed with the World Trade Center Towers. Second, in trying to make the transition from

local, chapter-based operations to Disaster Relief Operations (DRO), national disaster personnel were not able to be on site in normal time frames because planes and trains were not operating. Third, having the disaster sites be crime scenes caused significant identification and screening issues. In addition, in New York City, the complexity of the response and recovery needs had the DRO increasing efforts at a time when operations normally would have been scaling down. Consequently, the demands of the DRO had an unusual impact on volunteer professionals. Finally, and most relevant to this research, service organizations were overwhelmed by volunteer demand. According to one Red Cross professional, "We've never had this many volunteers at any disaster ... This is the most volunteers we've ever had in the history of the Red Cross." By two and one-half weeks after the disaster, the Red Cross had received approximately 22,000 offers of assistance and had processed 15,570 volunteers.

Sociologically, the events have provided a compelling opportunity to research large-scale disasters in the United States and the potentially unique hazard phenomenon that terrorism represents. Data gathered during the response and recovery efforts offer useful comparative information about how natural and technological disasters differ, how people interact with different types of disasters in similar or distinct ways, and how the consequences of a terrorist disaster compare and contrast with what is known from other disaster research. In particular, data gathered during the complex relief efforts can increase knowledge about individual helping activities and experiences. According to Tierney et al. (2001): "Despite its importance, volunteer behavior has not been studied extensively in the disaster research field. We know relatively little about spontaneous volunteers and even less about the other patterns of volunteer behavior..." This research project is exploratory and focuses on the motivations, observations, behaviors, and changes experienced by spontaneous volunteers responding to the World Trade Center attacks.

Using a purposive sample of individuals who helped or tried to help with immediate response efforts in New York City, 23 in-depth interviews were conducted with people ranging from 23 to 66 years of age. Of the respondents, 20 qualified as spontaneous volunteers and three were Red Cross professionals working with spontaneous volunteers. The respondents included 11 women and 12 men, all of whom had graduated from college. Their income levels ranged from low to very high. Their occupations included artists, financial analysts, teachers, counselors, producers, waiters, publishers, salespersons, and retired and unemployed persons. Respondents declared religious affiliations with Buddhism, Judaism, various forms of Christianity, and no organized religion. Two had served in the armed forces. Most of the participants had never volunteered before. Those who successfully volunteered following the World Trade Center attacks participated in a variety of helping behaviors within 96 hours of the disaster. Volunteer activities included: translating for families, delivering and moving supplies, removing debris, cheering for rescue workers, helping with crowd control, donating blood, counseling, preparing and serving food, fundraising, and giving massages to rescue workers

DATA ANALYSIS

Spontaneous Volunteer Experiences

Upon learning of the attacks, respondents described feelings of victimization, shock, powerlessness, hopelessness, helplessness, fear, and confusion. Based on a preliminary analysis of the data, the compelling primary motivations for volunteering were a need to better the situation for others, a need to reclaim power, and a need to redefine the circumstances as meaningful.

Overwhelmingly, those who were successful at volunteering demonstrated a tireless resolve to "either act or be paralyze(d). I had to do something." In addition, many of the spontaneous volunteers demonstrated opportunistic and sometimes deviant behaviors in order to overcome barriers to serving. For example, Mermaid, a 30-year-old Korean writer, shared her experience on September 12:

I kept insisting that...there was no organization, we were all waiting, even to take the number was hours. I kept going up to the policeman and I was like, 'Listen, you need my skill, you need somebody that speaks Korean.' We just realized we just have to go ourselves to the family center. We just walked to the armory on the other side of town. I just lied at the gate, I said, 'Listen, Jacob Javits sent me. You guys need Korean translator and somebody is waiting for me inside.' So I just went in. It was so unorganized.

Josh, a 31-year-old actor who had worked on a bucket brigade September 12, explained how he pursued volunteering on September 13:

So I went up to the Javits center and filled out paperwork to register there and when I got there, you are talking thousands and thousands of people. I actually cut the line, which is probably an immoral thing to do, but I had already seen the location and knew that I was capable of doing work there. I lived with the guilt of cutting the line.

The majority of individuals interviewed offered high praise for firefighters, police, and hospital personnel for their preparedness and well-organized response strategies. Most of them expressed a deepened understanding and appreciation of emergency responders with comments like, "I now see what disaster groups do and how well society is organized to address this kind of thing," and, "it was amazing to think that these are the men that dedicate their lives to running into the mouth of the fire while other people are running for their lives." Many respondents also mentioned the significance of Mayor Giuliani's leadership in creating a sense of security for people with his confident, factual, yet human presentations.

Concurrently, spontaneous volunteers encountered and observed a wide variety of obstacles to helping. Primarily, the volunteer management systems were overwhelmed by volunteer demand. Sandy, a Red Cross Local Disaster Volunteer Officer, observed:

In my history with Red Cross, this is the first time that every single person that I have dealt with has been personally affected. The fact that they are Americans and concerned and confused. In this particular situation, the entire country wants to help... They were coming from all over the world spontaneously.

The spontaneous volunteers in this study described frustrations of long lines, uncoordinated leadership, disorganized lists, and unclear information about what to do in the days immediately following the attacks. In addition, there was such significant response by people wanting to help that needs like requests for blood were saturated very quickly. For respondents who are homosexual, being gay was a barrier to volunteering because the dominant request for help, blood donations, was prohibited for them.

Impacts of Spontaneous Volunteerism

Collectively, the efforts of spontaneous volunteers significantly enhanced the effectiveness of meeting emergency response needs both directly and indirectly. In addition, solidarity among community members appeared to be enhanced by interacting with and working with new groups of people during volunteerism. Olivia, a 46-year-old Jewish single mother, explained what change she experienced as a result of giving massages to rescue workers:

There was a breakdown of a certain isolation and connecting to the larger community that happened as a result of living through this and volunteering. My relationship to the world was expanded by serving and relating to new groups of people like the police.

According to individuals who successfully helped, the experiences of volunteering were "empowering" and "healing" for them. They described feeling like authentic contributors to the response efforts. The acts of helping to transform the physical and emotional spaces of the disaster site changed their role from passive recipients of loss to active participants in the recovery of their community. Jim, a 32-year-old financial analyst, shared the following:

(Volunteering) was one of the best days of my life. I wish they could have found a way to let more people help who wanted to help... even if it was busy work... even if it was filing that needs to be done and it might not have anything to do with the tragedy but someone could have said to me, "You know, we have had this filing stacked up for about 2 months now and we are really backed up and if you help us file that frees somebody else who is more experienced in this situation to go and do something else." And I would be helping, even though I wasn't helping with the specific disaster... I think a lot of people who wanted to volunteer would have had the healing experience that I had that way.

The majority of those who had not volunteered before responding to the disaster expressed a likelihood of volunteering in the future to serve their community.

CONCLUSION

Terrorism constitutes a category of hazard unto itself. The unique setting has implications for the logistical management of response efforts and for the recovery of healthy communities in a victimized social context. It appears that terrorist disasters expand the direct impacts from the disaster sites themselves, where response and recovery are typically focused on serving losses of persons and place, to a widespread experience of loss of security demonstrated by feelings of fear and victimization. The terrorist attacks of September 11 were not "normal" disasters, and as a result they offer significant lessons to inform the disaster cycle in order to best serve humanity.

Recommendations

Based on the information provided by spontaneous volunteers and volunteer professionals, the data suggest the following recommendations. First, there could be more rapid focus on and communication to families, with a consistent and easily accessible family response center. One volunteer explained,

There's 168 hospitals or something and all of the families were going to every one of them, so there were these crazed people crying on the streets. The family center is, really to me, the Ground Zero. Ground Zero is happening over there, but this is in a way bigger. You're seeing women and kids. It's insane. Because each missing person comes with two to seven people roaming for them. So that number becomes...you could easily have 50,000 people, 40,000 people, families in devastation.

Second, there could be more rapid centralization and dissemination of authoritative information to community members about where to go and what to do to respond to disaster needs. Last, the findings of this quick response research suggest that active community service can be an effective strategy for both individual and community recovery. The potential healing role of volunteerism is important to recognize when dealing with a terrorist disaster because preparation and response mechanisms must be expanded to address the risks of widespread victimization. In order to attend to the unique issues related to terrorism's impacts, healthy recovery requires that efforts to empower and re-engage individuals in community life be included in addition to the necessary emphasis on grieving and rebuilding. Similar to mobilization efforts after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, governmental and non-governmental organizations can plan and provide individuals and groups with opportunities to serve disaster needs or related needs. The positive experiences of agency through volunteerism can help transform feelings of helplessness to feelings of efficacy. The new or renewed belief that one has the ability to influence one's environment thereby positively affects the social-psychological state of participants in affected areas. Given the generalized experience of victimization described by respondents in the study and by popular media since the attacks, governmental and nongovernmental response efforts should be expanded to encourage individual and collective helping activities not only at the disaster sites, but also throughout the nation.

Future Research Agendas

Long-term funding in this area could support a more representative demographic study of spontaneous volunteers in order to learn from their experiences to better inform community and organizational response and recovery efforts. According to the volunteer professionals, it also would serve volunteer management efforts to know motives, how to recruit volunteers, how to retain them, and how to thank them.

RESEARCH CITED

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