

Helping Disadvantaged Populations Prepare for Disasters

Assessing the Efficacy of the Emergency Preparedness Demonstration Framework

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Executive Summary

Disasters strike everyone, though certain groups and places are likely to be more seriously affected by them. The poor, those with less education or limited English, racial-ethnic minorities, the elderly, single-female households with young children, and those who face mental or physical challenges or are homebound often have limited capacity to prepare for and respond to natural disasters.

Low-income families, for example, may not have transportation or financial reserves to evacuate when disasters strike. The overstretched days of single parents may leave them little time to prepare for, or respond to, a disaster. Those with little education may find it hard to navigate federal assistance or negotiate with insurance companies. Rural communities in particular tend to be more vulnerable to disasters because of their relative isolation and limited resources.

With these impediments in mind, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) invested in the design of the Emergency Preparedness Demonstration (EPD) project, and asked the Southern Rural Development Center (SRDC) and a team of Cooperative Extension Service educators to evaluate its potential for improving the disaster readiness of more disadvantaged communities and individuals. This brief report highlights key results of this investigation.

Emergency Preparedness Demonstration Project

The EPD is designed to help advance the capacity of disadvantaged groups to develop and actively participate in disaster awareness and planning. The project provides a set of resources and procedures for spurring locally driven emergency preparedness planning, with a focus on low-wealth neighborhood and communities. It includes a six-step checklist, which provides disadvantaged groups a roadmap on how to organize, plan, coordinate, and implement emergency awareness and preparedness activities.

Evaluating the Effectiveness of EPD

To ensure that the EPD hits the mark and is a useful program, FEMA asked the SRDC and its Cooperative Extension Service partners to evaluate whether the EPD process makes sense for communities, especially in vulnerable communities and among disadvantaged populations. It sought to assess:

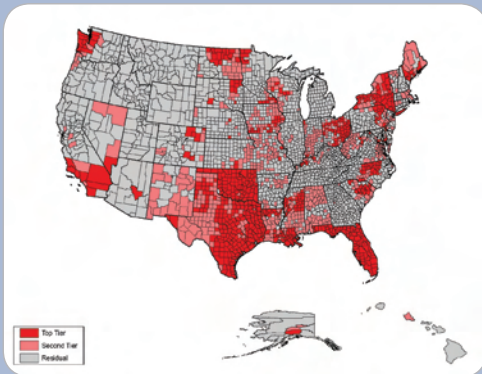
- How well EPD incorporates the needs of vulnerable groups
- How readily the communities embrace EPD



What do we mean by disadvantaged populations?

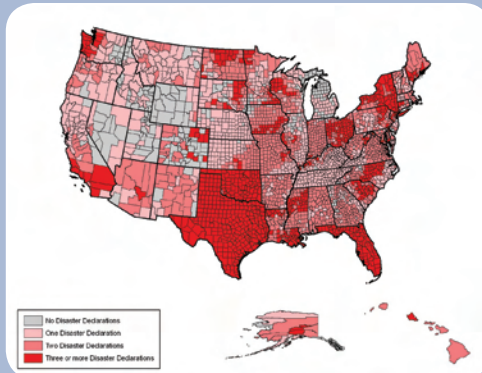
It represents individuals or communities with key social, demographic, economic and physical attributes that intensify their risk of being negatively affected by major hazards. It includes the poor, those with less education, non-English speakers, racial/ethnic minorities, the elderly, female-headed householders with young children, those who are disabled (i.e. due to physical or mental challenges), persons who are homebound, homeless, or living in remote or isolated areas of their community or county/parish.

Map 1



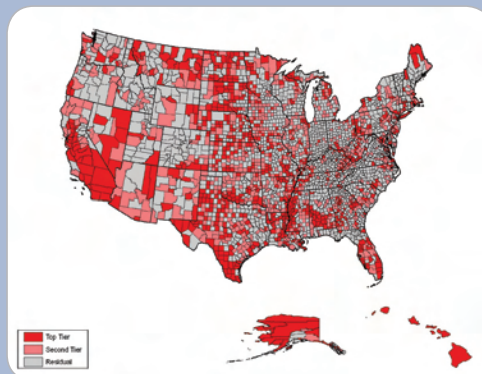
Total Number of Presidentially-Declared Disasters Experienced by U.S. Counties, 1998-2008

Map 2



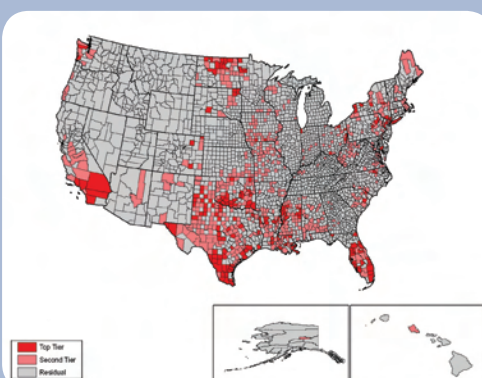
The Variety of Presidentially-Declared Disasters Experienced by U.S. Counties, 1998-2008

Map 3



The Social Vulnerability Index Associated with U.S. Counties (based on Cutter et al., 2003)

Map 4



Counties in the Top Two Tiers in Terms of the Number and Variety of Disasters Experienced, and with High Social Vulnerability

- Whether the EPD can identify needs that should be incorporated into local emergency planning
- Whether EPD provides a vehicle for disadvantaged groups to better prepare for disasters
- Whether communities should consider using a coach to guide them in the EPD effort
- Whether a “vulnerability assessment” map is helpful to the community

To begin to answer these questions, SRDC targeted five disaster-prone states across the country and held a series of roundtables with 435 participants, ranging from emergency response teams to disadvantaged community members. The five states were in Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Missouri. Two communities were selected in each state – one located in a rural (nonmetro) county and the second in a larger urban (metro) county. The team selected the sites by mapping declared disaster areas between 1998 and 2008 and areas that scored high on a social vulnerability index.

The team organized three roundtables in each locale.

First Roundtable: Participants included those with formal or voluntary roles in local disaster preparedness and response. These included local emergency management personnel, law enforcement, county/city government leaders, representatives of nonprofit organizations, Community Emergency Response Teams, transportation system coordinators, and business leaders, among others.

Second Roundtable: This roundtable reached out to individuals, households, and neighborhoods that are vulnerable to disasters. The team sought input from faith-based representatives, elderly and youth-serving organizations, nursing facility representatives, racial-ethnic minorities, low-wealth individuals, social and civic groups, and homeless shelter personnel.

Questions in both roundtables included:

- How did the community respond to recent disasters?
- What are the existing resources in the community?
- Are the EPD steps appropriate?
- Is the idea of a community “coach” a good one?
- Is the vulnerability assessment tool a useful way to identify at-risk people and neighborhoods?
- Should individuals living in disadvantaged neighborhoods be urged to develop a disaster plans for their locality?
- How can stronger ties be developed between emergency management personnel and representatives of disadvantaged populations?

Third Roundtable: This meeting served as a “bridge meeting,” uniting teams from each of the two prior roundtables to meet and share their respective

insights and, if feasible, build stronger working ties with one another. The hope was that the meeting would allow those charged with the responsibility for responding to disasters to strengthen their links with local residents who face major challenges whenever disasters strike.

Awareness of the Local Emergency Management Plans and Past Responses to Disasters

In most of the pilot sites, disadvantaged populations had limited awareness of any emergency plans or specific details of the plans—even though this is the group most impacted by disasters. Many admitted they had no personal plans either. Even though they were unaware of local disaster plans, they thought that the community’s response in the past to disasters had been adequate, and they found that having a trusted person in place who could communicate information was imperative to success. Participants saw the roundtables and EPD as opportunities to better tailor messages to a broad array of disadvantaged populations.

The roundtables also uncovered the fact that where one lives shapes the response to disasters. Those living in metro areas, for example, have access to more resources, including a larger pool of formal organizations that respond to disasters. In addition, people in urban areas more often rely on the formal disaster system. Those in nonmetro areas tend to trust neighbors and local providers and are more self-reliant. These and other distinctions should inform the response to disaster preparedness.

The Strengths of EPD

The response of roundtable participants to the EPD was generally positive. Participants thought it was effective, for example, in involving a broad base of people in disaster planning, and it sensitized local leaders to the needs of vulnerable populations. It also strengthened communication between and among citizens and agencies. Finally, it pinpointed areas of concern by mapping at-risk areas.

Shortcomings of the EPD

Participants in the roundtables saw areas for improvement as well. The EPD documents, they thought, could be better integrated into a curriculum resource for local use. An outline of topics to be covered in training sessions would be helpful, as would regular technical assistance in employing GIS mapping technology. Likewise, it would be helpful to develop a guidebook for conducting vulnerability assessments. The process was also time-consuming, which some thought would be a challenge in recruiting members, particularly those from vulnerable populations who have less time on their hands. Nonmetro communities worried about the level of resources required to undertake an EPD effort.

In general, participants thought communities would welcome a coach, especially if the person were to help guide the process, mediate conflicts, and help people take responsibility for the EPD plan. A coach, they believed, would eliminate bias and politics. Participants in metro areas were comfortable with an outside coach while those in nonmetro areas preferred to recruit an “insider,” someone who knew the community well.



What’s the Role of a Community Coach?

What is the role of the coach and why could it be an asset to those pursuing disaster preparedness using the EPD process? According to Hubbell and Emery (2009:1), “coaching . . . means offering an empathetic ear, finding the coachable moments and engaging in joint learning. Coaches are not the answer people; they support capacity building by helping community members learn from one another and from their own experiences.” Coaches improve communication, address and resolve community conflicts, identify and connect resources available, build stronger working relationships among local people and organizations; and assist communities to respond to changes impacting their communities.



At the same time, participants voiced some concerns about a coach, including that the person have the right mix of education and experience and have clearly defined roles. More important in their eyes was funding. Paying for the services of a coach was a major concern in less well-off communities. Whether the coach should be an insider or an outsider was left up in the air; each community would have to work out the pros and cons of each. Some worried that emergency management officials would be hesitant to support the efforts of a coach, while others worried that local politics would thwart his or her effectiveness. Training would be necessary in some communities.

Final Recommendations

- 1) The EPD is a valuable process and should be introduced to communities and neighborhoods, especially those with sizable numbers of disadvantaged populations. To be fully effective, however, it needs a better training curriculum; a short description of a community coach, including his or her key roles and core competencies; a list of resources in the area for developing maps of vulnerable populations, buildings, services, businesses, and other key populations and resources; and guidelines on how to secure local buy-in and participation in the EDP process.
- 2) FEMA should consider launching a series of train-the-trainer workshops to strengthen the capacity of individuals and organizations in the EPD program.
- 3) FEMA should consider implementing a competitive grants program that invests funds in communities and/or counties that propose to initiate the EPD program. Nonmetro areas may warrant special attention for this grant program.
- 4) More generally, communities need to broaden disaster planning participation. Disaster planning should not be the sole province of disaster response agencies or organizations. Embracing an inclusive process garners wider support in the community.

The right mix of strategies can help disadvantaged people, neighborhoods, and communities better prepare for and position themselves to respond to disasters whenever or wherever they occur. The EPD is a positive step in that direction.

To access the full report with detailed information about this project, visit
<http://srdc.msstate.edu/>

About this project

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