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Interplay between Public Policy and Social Policy

In Chapter 2, we provide 10 case studies on major disaster events to show that the same issues present themselves after each disaster. That is, pre-existing conditions in a community drive what happens during and after a disaster. Unfortunately, in most instances, government and emergency management did not factor preexisting conditions into a tailored response and recovery. What does this mean for a community? It means that issues that exist prior to a disaster are exacerbated post-disaster and hinder resiliency for many communities. Not understanding or properly dealing with these preexisting conditions costs not only money but also lives. And over time, disasters will continue to hit communities and preexisting conditions will worsen. Ignoring these issues will continue a cycle of poor response and recovery efforts by emergency management.

This leads us to Chapter 3; in this chapter we will discuss the interplay between public policy and social policy and how these two sometimes competing structures combust during disaster. Disaster policy is social policy. Understanding this will help emergency managers understand how perceptions shape public policy. How government and society view people plays a significant role in electing our leaders, which results in laws and public policies. These laws and public policies are a reflection of the times. Once a disaster is added to the mix, the entire social fabric is exposed.

Historically, the fundamental question regarding disaster policy has been: How big of a role should government play prior to, during, and after a disaster? The public's view on this issue is constantly evolving because

of the interplay between politics, public policy, and how the electorate views various communities.

Citizens groups, members of Congress, and bureaucrats name particular groups of disaster victims as part of the American community and as deserving of help. Sometimes they argue for the community's obligation to victims of disaster, and at other times they protest that the bonds of sympathy are not strong enough to entangle the central government in what should be local and private matters. Whether or not the federal government intervenes is fought out in a kind of Hegelian dialectic for America between the ideals of a community's obligation to its members and the limited state. Over time, the democratic impulse prevails, and in disaster policy the impulse is a tendency to claim greater benefits for a greater number of people based on arguments about who is most deserving.*

Is disaster relief purely a function of the individual? Or should disaster relief be left to local, state, or nonprofit entities? Answers to these questions will vary depending on the political and philosophical leanings of the person answering. While this book respects the connection between the will of the people and the corresponding actions of the elected government, the foundation of disaster and social policy is rooted in how people perceive one another. Specifically, any group distributing resources always measures whether the group seeking help or relief is deserving of that help or whether there is a more deserving group. In sum, preconceived notions of the value of a group of people or perceptions of a group often drive how policies are developed and implemented. This is hardly an objective approach. This is where social intelligence can help dismantle poorly constructed perceptions in order to achieve a more robust end—a more resilient community.

Understanding that the political process is a reflection of the times can help emergency managers understand how a disaster impacts various populations. The goal of this chapter is not to change your thoughts about public policy or the political process, but instead to help you understand that sometimes public policy is shaped by perceptions (for better or for worse), and these perceptions shape how we prepare, respond to, and recover from disaster.

Think about this quote again: "We told you to leave. Why didn't you leave?" This quote is a result of a perception that many of the 100,000

* *Building the Disaster State: The Development of US Disaster Policy, 1789–1900* by Patrick S. Roberts Center for Public Administration and Policy -School of Public and International Affairs Paper prepared for presentation at the 2009 American Political Science Association Meeting in Toronto, CA, September 2–5, page 5.

people stranded during Katrina chose not to leave. Much of public dialogue was centered on irresponsibility. News pundits, government officials, and everyday people initially believed that 100,000 people made the irresponsible decision to stay behind and weather the storm. As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, some preexisting conditions that prevented people from evacuating include

1. Many had nowhere to go.
2. Some did not have transportation.
3. Those that did have transportation did not have the financial resources to fill the gas tank or secure temporary shelter.
4. Many relied heavily on social networks (parish groups, extended family, friends) to make daily ends meet. Disconnecting from the social networks would devastate families.

These examples are just a small sampling of the complicated nature of why people make decisions about evacuating or sheltering in place. These same complications impact recovery. Isn't it about time emergency management takes these factors into account while developing emergency management systems? In order to develop more robust plans, we must understand that emergency management and emergency management policy are inextricably linked to public policy. And as stated before, public policy is a reflection of the electorate and elected officials.

As seen in the case studies, vulnerable populations are most severely impacted during and after disaster. The preexisting conditions—the interplay of social policy and vulnerable communities—are largely driven by perception. This chapter will look at the relationship between perceptions of vulnerable populations during and after disaster. You will see clear parallels and, in most instances, find that clichés and long-held beliefs about deserving and undeserving communities drive how government responds to disasters.

This chapter will illustrate how politics and perceptions shape social welfare policy. More importantly, this chapter does not lay blame on conservative, liberal, progressive, or any other political philosophy. Rather, the chapter illustrates how two centuries of politics and perception of the poor have shaped policies impacting the poor. Understanding the roots and evolution of public policy will help you understand how disaster relief policy developed. In sum, this chapter will provide a brief but detailed historical perspective on perceptions of the poor before and after disaster in addition to discussing how policy makers think about poor communities. Finally, the intent of the chapter is not to root out a specific political

ideology. That said, in order to develop a social intelligence framework for your community or organization, it is important to understand how we got here and how we can integrate nuance into disaster response and recovery. A trillion dollars have already been spent—it's time to rethink how we spend the next trillion.

THE HISTORY OF DISASTER RELIEF AND SOCIAL WELFARE POLICY

Why are the connections between social welfare policy and disaster relief policy important to social intelligence? First, in order to provide a new perspective to emergency management, it is important to see the historical evolution of disaster policy. Research has shown that those who face the greatest impacts and have the least ability to recover from disaster in the United States are those who are in need or are on the verge of needing governmental assistance in daily life.*

Prior to the 19th century, the United States granted relief to various claimants via private bills.[†] By the mid-19th century, Congress had passed separate relief bills for such events as grasshopper plagues, Mississippi River floods, and the Civil and Indian Wars.[‡] Until this point, the U.S. Congress took action when it saw fit (when claimants were seen as blameless) and voted unanimously to provide relief to claimants. Michele Landis, author of *The Sympathetic State: Disaster Relief and the Origins of the American Welfare State*, argues that the origins of social welfare policy are rooted in the first appropriations of federal aid for disaster-type events. Landis argues that social welfare policy evolved from the federal government allocations for fires, floods, droughts, and other disasters. From the first private bills for relief of distress in the late 18th century, every successful claim enhanced the appeal of disaster relief as a precedent for those seeking federal funds.[§]

From the very beginning, Congress was very wary of expending federal dollars to aid disaster victims. Strong opposition always

* Meyer, Michelle A., Internal Environmental Displacement: Challenge to the United States in *Welfare State Disaster and Sociolegal Studies*, ed. Susan Sterett.

† Dauber, Michele Landis, *The Sympathetic State: Disaster Relief and the Origins of the American Welfare State*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2013.

‡ Dauber, Michele Landis, *The Sympathetic State: Disaster Relief and the Origins of the American Welfare State*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2013, location 522 of 9,055.

§ Dauber, Michele Landis, *The Sympathetic State: Disaster Relief and the Origins of the American Welfare State*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2013, location 874 of 9,055.

presented itself when the federal government attempted to provide relief post-disaster.

Massachusetts Federalist Benjamin Goodhue complained about a request for relief after a 174 fire in Boston: "A fire happened lately in Boston, which destroyed ten or twenty thousand pounds worth of commodities that had paid duties. What kind of business would it be if all these persons were to come forward and demand compensation?... Claims of this kind would never have any end."^{*}

The quote above best exemplifies a historical attitude of Americans and their elected leaders toward disaster relief. Setting precedent was a consistent worry. Policy makers wondered aloud about paying one set of disaster victims and creating a permanent precedent that would expand the role of the federal government. Wrapped up in the philosophical debate surrounding the role of the federal government post-disaster, individual rights, and other governance issues was the idea of people seen as deserving or undeserving of help.

Does it make sense to determine fault during and after disaster? Who makes those judgments? For many years, Congress made those determinations. Each claim for disaster relief was handled individually. And during each debate, politicians debated the merits of the claim without any foundational knowledge of the population they were discussing.

Time after time, Congress made decisions about disaster relief based on its perceptions of a community. It debated whether disaster relief would result in dependency on government. Or whether one community deserved more help than another. This uneven and discriminatory policy was rooted in American thinking that government should not play a role in the life of the individual and, more importantly, that individuals going through difficult times have the wherewithal to lift themselves out of difficulty.

In Michele Landis's book *The Sympathetic State: Disaster Relief and the Origins of the American Welfare State*, she cites Harvard professor Alexander Keyssar:

No one doubted that business panics occasionally threw some men and women out of work, but it was widely believed that these were transient episodes, affecting a small number of workers, who found new jobs in short order. If a worker was idled repeatedly or for a prolonged period of time, it was almost certainly his own choice or his own fault.[†]

^{*} Sarat, Austin, *Catastrophe: Law, Politics, and the Humanitarian Impulse*, p. 65.

[†] Dauber, Michele Landis, *The Sympathetic State: Disaster Relief and the Origins of the American Welfare State*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2013, location 1,168.

Landis goes on to cite Keyssar and write that this attitude began to change as depressions and other economic downturns impacted communities. Interestingly, Landis argues that the foundation for the New Deal was rooted in disaster relief policy.

Over time, the federal government increasingly involved itself in matters related to disaster relief; the consistent worry among lawmakers was to narrow relief so as not to encourage abuse or dependency. This philosophy and approach descends from the earlier Keyssar quote—a historical belief that individuals can lift themselves out of times of trouble.

The purpose of this chapter is not to argue for an influx of relief or for massive expansion of government. Instead, we argue that a construct based on beliefs that government relief should only go to deserving people guarantees failure during and after disaster. Allowing the allocation of disaster relief to follow this construct subjects disaster victims to the politics of the day. We believe there is a better way to deal with disaster policy—via social intelligence.

Later in this chapter, you will read about how disaster victims and current disaster relief policy are driven by perception. We have already argued that who we elect and the policies that result are directly correlated with how people view one another. More importantly, there are historical connections between disaster relief policy and general social welfare policy.

PROCESS OF DECLARING A DISASTER— STATE PROCESS AND THE STAFFORD ACT

In this section, we will provide a brief history of disaster policy. Understanding the process within the context of politics, perception, and preexisting conditions is important. Earlier in this chapter we argued that our public policy is a reflection of how we view people and communities.

The federal government provided no assistance to individuals until the Disaster Relief Act of 1974—the act created the Individual and Family Grant Program.* And until the passage of the Stafford Act in 1988, the

* Daniels, Richard R., *Vulnerability and Responsiveness in U.S. Disaster Policy: The Impact of the Stafford Act*, Conference Papers—Midwestern Political Science Association 1, 2009. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed September 21, 2013).

federal government only responded to natural disasters and occasional chemical and commercial disasters.*

So what has to happen for a state or municipality to receive disaster relief from the federal government? When disaster strikes, state and local governments assess the damage and determine the capability of the local jurisdiction and state to respond.[†] If the damage caused by the disaster greatly exceeds the capacity of the local government, the governor of the state declares a statewide disaster declaration. If the governor and the state emergency management agency decide the state cannot properly resource and respond to the disaster, the disaster relief request is made to the regional Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) director. Next, the regional FEMA director conducts his or her assessment of the damage. Finally, the governor makes a written request to the president of the United States. The governor must indicate that every resource to assist the affected area has been exhausted or the disaster requires resources beyond the capacity of the state. After another review by FEMA, the president makes the final decision on whether to declare disaster.

POLITICS, PERCEPTION, DISASTER, AND SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE

The larger issue here is whether socially constructed views on deserving and undeserving populations are the best way to prepare, respond to, and recover from disaster. The answer is no.

The next section will provide in detail how perception and socially constructed views of the vulnerable impact disaster response and recovery policies and operations. Before you read the next section, think about this concept: When it comes to national security and understanding a nation's friends and foes, intelligence analysts focus on cold hard facts. That is, they study their target country's economics, population, geopolitical position, reputation, wealth, access to resources, and many other factors in order to gain some strategic understanding of the country. While politicians may hold certain beliefs and perceptions about the target country, intelligence analysts seek to provide a very matter-of-fact reading of the country based

* Daniels, Richard R., *Vulnerability and Responsiveness in U.S. Disaster Policy: The Impact of the Stafford Act*, Conference Papers—Midwestern Political Science Association 1, 2009. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed September 21, 2013).

[†] Ibid.

on various sets of information. Intelligence analysis also requires multiple viewpoints, and the target country is studied from a variety of angles. The goal: put our country's best foot forward via an objective approach. The politicians and policy makers are then free to add their subjectivity.

We don't use this process when writing domestic public policy. From the start, we use subjective frames to develop policies and programs. And this is certainly true in emergency management.

The next section will provide an exhaustive review of the connections between disaster policy, emergency management operations, socially vulnerable populations, and the social constructed views we place on top of disaster.

PERCEPTIONS OF POVERTY AND DISASTER

Perceptions are not facts; nevertheless, perceptions are the starting point for other attitudes and behaviors.* How people perceive their neighbors, other communities—disaster victims, the rich, the poor, and everything in between—impacts how governments develop policy and respond to the needs of their people. This idea is distinctively separate from politics. This chapter originated as part of our graduate work at the University of Chicago. The topic of perception, poverty, and disaster, and our conversations on this topic, often provoked strange looks at emergency management conferences, and our professors even questioned the relevance of perception in emergency management. We continued to push this conversation because we understood that public policy is rooted in how people think about other people. And if this was true outside of disasters, then it is true to how people and systems interact during and after disaster. The key difference: the disaster event magnifies these socially constructed beliefs and puts a spotlight on the systems that result from these beliefs. This does not mean one specific political ideology, party, or philosophy is superior and the other inferior. The purpose and importance of this chapter is that if we are to create a socially intelligent emergency management system, emergency managers must understand how preexisting conditions came to be. This means understanding the good, the bad, and the ugly. This

* Rahm, Dianne, and Christopher G. Reddick, US City Managers' Perceptions of Disaster Risks: Consequences for Urban Emergency Management, *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management* 19(3): 136–146, 2011. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed September 20, 2013).

includes acknowledging how historical trauma, institutionalized racism, and other structural and social problems are magnified during disaster.

Immediately after Hurricane Katrina we heard that the storm exposed the underbelly of New Orleans and America. The devastating storm only put a spotlight on everyday conditions in the city. If people didn't have the resources or transportation to evacuate at a moment's notice, they certainly didn't have those same resources in their daily life prior to disaster. Our point: the storm only brought attention to daily life in New Orleans with a disaster piled on.

Creating a socially intelligent emergency management system is not just about acknowledging social problems. Nor is it solely about responding to the structural issues surrounding poverty. Our social intelligence model is rooted in understanding the existing problems and making sense of how those problems were addressed. In most cases, it is simply acknowledging the social construction of the problem.

This chapter will shed light on the connections between preexisting perceptions surrounding vulnerable populations. These perceptions often shape elections and result in public policy. As a result of existing public policy, these perceptions help form opinions of communities and people during and after disaster.

In the introduction section of this book we wrote that the United States has spent \$1 trillion on disaster response and recovery, and we are no more resilient after having spent that money than prior to the disaster. If we want better results from the next trillion, we must understand how we got here. How we got here is rooted in perception.

We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn't do it, but God did.

—Rep. Richard Baker (R-La.), September 8, 2005*

PERCEPTIONS, REALITY, AND WHY WE CARE

Most of us remember the news coverage following Hurricane Katrina. After days of coverage where heroic images of the Coast Guard dominated were reports of all the ways evacuees had decided to take advantage of their situation and the federal aid system, in order to defraud the government and the

* Babington, C. (2005, September 10). Some GOP legislators hit jarring notes in addressing Katrina. *The Washington Post*, p. A04

American taxpayer for recovery money. As government reports about evacuee expenditures on jewelry, alcohol, and football tickets surfaced—and sensational media stories about purchases of guns, booze, and tattoos flooded the airwaves—access to recovery money became more difficult. Subsequently, those victimized by the storm and the inadequate disaster response became illustrations, through public discourse, of how America perceives the poor.

America saw on display uninformed assumptions and accusations based on commonly held beliefs about the poor. The public discourse was severe, not simple chatter at the water cooler or thoughts posted on personal blogs, but as statements vocalized by American leaders. Some suggested that conditions in the Astrodome were adequate as most people were poor anyway. Others displayed a complete lack of understanding regarding the ability of people to evacuate. And, many expressed a desire to punish people for their “bad choices.” Some examples include

What I'm hearing, which is sort of scary, is that they all want to stay in Texas. Everybody is so overwhelmed by the hospitality. And so many of the people in the arena here you know, were underprivileged anyway so this [chuckle]—this is working very well for them.

—Former First Lady Barbara Bush, on the hurricane evacuees at the Astrodome in Houston, September 5, 2005*

I don't make judgments about why people chose not to leave, but, you know, there was a mandatory evacuation of New Orleans.

—FEMA Director Michael Brown, arguing that the victims bear some responsibility[†]

I mean, you have people who don't heed those warnings and then put people at risk as a result of not heeding those warnings. There may be a need to look at tougher penalties on those who decide to ride it out and understand that there are consequences to not leaving.

—Sen. Rick Santorum (R-Pa.), September 6, 2005[‡]

* E&P Staff. (2005). Barbara Bush: things working out ‘very well’ for poor evacuees from New Orleans. *Editor & Publisher*, Retrieved April 16, 2009, from http://politicalhumor.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?zi=1/XJ&sdn=politicalhumor&cdn=entertainment&tm=23&f=00&su=p504.1.336.ip_&tt=2&bt=0&bts=0&zu=http%3A//www.editorandpublisher.com/eandp/news/article_display.jsp%3Fvnu_content_id%3D1001054719

[†] FEMA chief: victims bear some responsibility. (2005). Retrieved April 16, 2009, from <http://www.cnn.com/2005/WEATHER/09/01/katrina.fema.brown/>

[‡] Kurtzman, D. (n.d.). *Stupid quotes about Hurricane Katrina*. Retrieved April 15, 2009, from <http://politicalhumor.about.com/od/currentevents/a/katrinaquotes.htm>

How can you have the mess we have in New Orleans, and not have had deep investigations of...the failure of citizenship in the Ninth Ward, where 22,000 people were so uneducated and so unprepared, they literally couldn't get out of the way of a hurricane.

—Newt Gingrich*

The purpose of this chapter is to further discuss perceptions of the poor in America, reveal some of the realities of who is poor and why, and propose why it is critical information to consider in emergency management preparedness and operational planning.

Perceptions

Conversations about New Orleans post-Katrina paid acute attention to the Ninth Ward and its public housing residents and welfare recipients. In Chicago, during recovery operations, we often had to convince evacuees to pursue FEMA recovery money, for obtaining federal aid was foreign to most and embarrassing to many. One woman expressed her frustration at having to ask for assistance, as she had been the head of her household and "never asked for anything from anyone." She expressed the devastation she felt from both the storm itself and the fear of how she would be perceived when asking for help, as well as the desire to not be seen as a "welfare queen." She said, "I don't want the FEMA money, I want a job. A month ago I was a teacher, maybe poor, but a leader in my community. Today we are champagne-buying scam artists" (ABA conference participant, personal communication, February 10, 2006).

The fear of the welfare queen perception, post-Katrina, was not unfounded, given the public discourse at the time. However, in the disaster context, it is particularly poignant as this evacuee was eligible for disaster assistance for the exact same reasons as a wealthy New Orleanian, but expressed concern and frustration about pursuing the aid because of the long-standing public sentiment against the poor and utilization of public assistance.

The term *welfare queen* was created by former President Ronald Reagan while on the campaign trail. When delivering stump speeches in the 1970s, a major focus was on rolling back welfare. In order to illustrate

* Kromm, C. (2007). *Gulf watch: Gingrich at CPAC: New Orleans destroyed by lack of education, "citizenship."* Retrieved April 17, 2009, from <http://www.southernstudies.org/2007/03/gingrich-at-cpac-new-orleans-destroyed.html>

his reasoning for reducing social spending,* Reagan often told the story of a woman from the South Side of Chicago who drove a Cadillac and ripped off \$150,000 from the government using 80 aliases, 30 addresses, a dozen social security cards, and 4 fictional dead husbands.[†] Given all the attention to this welfare queen, journalists attempted to find her in the hopes of interviewing her, but discovered she did not exist.[‡]

While the woman was not real, the image remained and helped lay the groundwork for subsequent poverty policy. So, even though the image was hyperbole, its impact was very real.[§] According to Cassiman, the stories that we tell, the words we use, and the discourse of politics have shaped poverty policy as we know it in the United States. Utilizing words such as *welfare queen* conjures fear and dread, warranted or not. As welfare became a program associated with poor black mothers, “it became easier to attack,” drawing on racist and misogynistic rhetoric.[¶]

The 8 years of the Reagan administration saw dramatic cuts to social spending, including Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), child care, unemployment insurance, legal aid, subsidized housing, and public and mental health services. As the cuts coincided with the recession, poverty and unemployment soared.^{**} There was also a steep increase in the number of homeless people, which by the late 1980s had jumped to 600,000 on any given night, and 1.2 million over the course of a year. Many were veterans, children, and laid-off workers with no safety net. In a 1984 *Good Morning America* interview, Reagan attempted to defend himself against charges of callousness toward the poor and famously stated, “People who are sleeping on the grates . . . the homeless . . . are homeless, you might say, by choice.”^{††}

* Iceland, J. (2006). *Poverty in America: a handbook*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, Ltd., p. 4.

† Dreier, P. (2004). Reagan's legacy: homelessness in America. *National Housing Institute*, 135. Retrieved April 15, 2009, from <http://www.nhi.org/online/issues/135/reagan.html>, pg. 3.
‡ Ibid.

§ Cassiman, S.A. (2008). Resisting the neo-liberal poverty discourse: on constructing dead-beat dads and welfare queens. *Sociology Compass*, 2(5), 1690–1700. Retrieved April 15, 2009, from Wiley Interscience database, p. 1691.

¶ Cassiman, S.A. (2008). Resisting the neo-liberal poverty discourse: on constructing dead-beat dads and welfare queens. *Sociology Compass*, 2(5), 1690–1700. Retrieved April 15, 2009, from Wiley Interscience database, p. 1692.

** Iceland, J. (2006). *Poverty in America: a handbook*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, Ltd., p. 125.

†† Dreier, P. (2004). Reagan's legacy: homelessness in America. *National Housing Institute*, 135. Retrieved April 15, 2009, from <http://www.nhi.org/online/issues/135/reagan.html>, p. 4.

Reagan alludes in this comment to a popularly held belief that personal failings lead to poverty; if one worked hard enough, the system would allow him to pull himself up by his bootstraps, so to speak. This is a commonly held assumption, dating back to the beginnings of the nation. From the colonial period through the 19th century, the prevailing belief was that the roots of poverty lay chiefly not in structural economic causes, but in a person's individual misbehavior.^{*} The poor were often seen as deserving or undeserving of public support.[†] The deserving tended to be children and the elderly. The undeserving were everyone else—the “idle able-bodied”—and were subject to indentured servitude, public whippings, or jail as a consequence to their time spent “idly or unprofitably.”[‡]

The deserving/undeserving notion continued well into the 19th century, as the undeserving were considered “dependant, defective, and delinquent.”[§] Poorhouses opened as a method of punishing the poor. They were harsh, and the “inmates” were required to work as a form of punishment, moral training, education, and reform. Poorhouses fell out of favor in the beginning of the 20th century, as public officials began to realize that these types of institutions did little to reduce poverty and, in some cases, even exacerbated family instability.[¶]

In the beginning of the 20th century, some voices (e.g., authors, researchers, and Hull House social workers) speaking for the structural nature of poverty received attention. Harry Lurie, chairman of the American Association of Social Work Subcommittee on Federal Action, wrote in 1934 that “the dislocations and malfunctioning of the economic functions which produce unemployment and distress are not of an accidental character but are inherent in the nature of our economic organization.”^{**} While articulate, the structuralist argument did not win over most people, even at the height of the Great Depression. Well into the late 1930s, popular attitudes remained harsh, and polls showed the majority of people believed that “most poor people could get off relief if they tried hard enough.” The poor were commonly referred to as “good-for-nothing-loafers” and “pampered

^{*} Iceland, J. (2006). *Poverty in America: a handbook*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, Ltd., p. 11.

[†] Ibid.

[‡] Ibid.

[§] Iceland, J. (2006). *Poverty in America: a handbook*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, Ltd., p. 12.

[¶] Ibid.

^{**} Patterson, J. T. (2000). *America's struggle against poverty in the twentieth century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. pp. 43–44.

poverty rats.”* Jokes of the time illustrate the lasting power of the lazy poor stereotype, such as: “There’s a new cure for cancer, but they can’t get any of it. It’s sweat from a WPA worker.” The initials WPA were often joked to mean “we pay for all” or “we putter around.”†

Despite the attempts of the “war on poverty” in the 1960s, poverty persists—as do the perceptions of the poor.‡ In 1975, one of the first large-scale studies of attributions of poverty was conducted. The researcher found that individualistic attributions were supported more strongly than other explanations, a finding that is “indicative of the national tendency to view poverty as a sign of personal and moral failure and the individualism characteristic of western cultures.”§ Other theories exist on the causes of poverty, such as structuralism, culturalism, and fatalism.¶ However, as with attributions for poverty, individualistic explanations for wealth (e.g., drive, talent, hard work, risk taking) receive much greater support in the United States than structural acknowledgments. Thus, according to Bullock, “it is not simply the poor who are seen as deserving their economic status.”**

In addition to the long history of the poor being perceived as lazy, uneducated, and morally askew, the poor today are often perceived to be nonwhite, and in most cases African American.†† In a 1996 study investigating the accuracy of the media in portrayals of the poor between 1988 and 1992, it was found that the face of poverty was disproportionately black.†‡ While fewer than one-third of the poor are black, according to media portrayal, two out of every three poor people, or about 66%, are black. The study conducted by Martin Gilens also found that the deserving poor,

* Patterson, J. T. (2000). *America's struggle against poverty in the twentieth century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. p. 45.

† Ibid.

‡ Appelbaum, L.D. (2001). The influence of perceived deservingness on policy decisions regarding aid to the poor [Electronic version]. *Political Psychology*, 22(3), 419–442. p. 419.

§ Bullock, H. (2006). Justifying inequality: a social psychological analysis of beliefs about poverty and the poor. *National Poverty Center*. Retrieved April 15, 2009, from http://www.npc.edu/publications/working_papers/ p. 5.

¶ Smith, K.B. & Stone, L.H. (1989). Rags, riches, and bootstraps: beliefs about the causes of wealth and poverty [Electronic version]. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 30(1), 93–107. p. 95.

** Bullock, H. (2006). Justifying inequality: a social psychological analysis of beliefs about poverty and the poor. *National Poverty Center*. Retrieved April 15, 2009, from http://www.npc.edu/publications/working_papers/ p. 7.

†† Appelbaum, L.D. (2001). The influence of perceived deservingness on policy decisions regarding aid to the poor [Electronic version]. *Political Psychology*, 22(3), 419–442. p. 422.

†‡ Clawson, R.A. & Trice, R. (2000). Poverty as we know it: media portrayals of the poor [Electronic version]. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 64, 53–64. p. 54.

especially the black deserving poor (e.g., working poor, elderly poor), were underrepresented in news magazines.*

In a 1990s survey about perceptions of the poverty population, respondents were asked, "What percent of all the poor people in this country would you say are black?" The median response was 50%. In a subsequent study a few years later, people were asked, "Of all the people who are poor in this country, are more of them black or white?" Fifty-five percent of the respondents thought more blacks than whites were poor, 24% thought more whites were poor, and the remaining considered the percentages to be equal. In interpreting his result, Gilens argues that this public view illustrates negative racial stereotypes, including the assumption that blacks are poor and lazy.[†]

Realities

Contrary to common perception and media portrayals, the poor are not disproportionately black, nor do they possess the characteristics attributed to the undeserving poor (e.g., lazy, bad decision making). In fact, the vast majority of poor Americans are white,[‡] and those who obtain public cash assistance (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)) are required to work and are only able to access this aid for a total of 5 years over their lifetime. The amount of TANF given to families depends on the state. In Illinois, in 2006, cash assistance for a family of three (only in a household with minor children) could receive a maximum of \$396 (28.6% of the federal poverty line).[§]

In addition, according to Mark Rank, a social welfare professor at Washington University in St. Louis, one in three Americans will experience a full year of extreme poverty at some point in their adult life (extreme poverty is defined at 50% of the federal poverty line).[¶] An esti-

* Clawson, R.A. & Trice, R. (2000). Poverty as we know it: media portrayals of the poor [Electronic version]. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 64, 53–64. p. 54.

[†] Iceland, J. (2006). *Poverty in America: a handbook*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, Ltd., p. 39.

[‡] U.S. Census Bureau.(2007). Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States. Retrieved April 14, 2009, from <http://www.census.gov/prod/2008pubs/p60-235.pdf>

[§] National Center for Children in Poverty. *Illinois temporary assistance for needy families (TANF) cash assistance*. Retrieved May 27, 2009, from http://www.nccp.org/profiles/IL_profile_36.html

[¶] Heartland Alliance for Human Needs and Human Rights. (2008). The 2008 report on Illinois poverty. Chicago, IL: Rynell, A. p. 7.

mated 58% of Americans between the ages of 20 and 75 will spend at least a year in poverty. Much like the disaster motto of “not if, but when,” Rank also believes that, for most Americans, it appears it is also no longer if, but rather when, they will experience poverty. He says, “In short, poverty has become a routine and unfortunate part of the American life course.”^{*}

As of the most recent U.S. census data (2010–2011), 48.5 million Americans were living in poverty. This represents about 16% of the entire population. The national poverty numbers are determined by the federal poverty threshold.

It is also important to note that the federal poverty line is a minimal standard. There are many people considered poor or low-income who are not at or under the poverty threshold.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, poverty in America has generally been considered to be caused by individual failings (e.g., laziness, bad decision making). It seems we might hold so strongly to the premise of the American dream (i.e., “work hard and you shall receive”) that we have been unable to accept that alternative theories could simultaneously exist. However, given the high rates of poverty, statistics that show most people will experience poverty at some point in their lifetime, and the reality that most people who are poor are working or are job seekers, it seems undeniable that other factors besides individual failings must contribute to poverty.

In 2000, when President George Bush announced his first cabinet, he stated, “People who work hard and make the right decisions in life can achieve anything they want in America.”[†] What goes unrecognized by this prevalent yet simplistic view is the presence of (1) social failings and (2) structural failings in our economic system that can lead to poverty. Social failures such as sexism, racism, ageism, homophobia, xenophobia, etc., are issues American society continues to contend with. While the United States has certainly progressed in offering equal opportunities to all, companies and institutions continue to attempt to correct for social failures that permeate society with policy (e.g., affirmative action, minority hiring). For the purposes of this chapter, we will not focus on social issues as heavily as market failures.

* Pugh, T. (2007, February 26). Many Americans are Falling Deeper into the Depths of Poverty. *The Seattle Times*. Retrieved April 16, 2009, from http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/nationworld/2003589318_poverty26.html, p. 1.

† Henry, J.F. (2007). “Bad” decisions, poverty, and economic theory: the individualist and social perspectives in light of “the American myth.” *The Forum for Social Economics*, 36, 17–27. doi: 10.1007/s12143-007-0005-z, p. 18.

The structural failure that contradicts the pervasive individual failings theory for poverty is market failure. Adam Smith, often considered the father of modern economics, was the first major economic theorist to associate poverty with the normal functioning of a capitalist economy. He said, "Wherever there is great property, there is great inequality. For one very rich man, there must be at least five hundred poor."^{*} John F. Henry, economics professor, agrees. He writes, "Poverty is endemic to capitalism: given the normal workings of capitalism, poverty cannot be eliminated."[†] He sums up Smith's view on poverty as a societal outcome necessary to the foundations of capitalism and not the result of laziness or bad decisions, as "capitalism requires exploitation, and exploitation mandates a systemic division into rich and poor."[‡] Simply put, laborers work for business owners who obtain a significantly larger percentage of the earnings from the labor. In addition, it is always better for the business owner to keep low-wage workers in order to maximize profit. This is not to say that economic growth is not beneficial in driving down poverty rates, but it certainly can be. It is good for business owners to be doing well and for the economy to thrive. This brings benefits to large segments of the population. However, even in times of great prosperity, many Americans continue to experience poverty.

In short, we have chosen an economic system that works for many, but will always keep a percentage of people poor. As a result, there will always be people who live with increased vulnerabilities. For many, this is caused by the inability of the labor market to support all job seekers. Over the past 25 years, the American economy has experienced a substantial increase in the number of low-wage and part-time jobs.[§] In fact, a 2000 study of U.S. full-time workers found that 25% of all American full-time workers could be classified as being employed in low-wage work, when low-wage is defined as earning less than 65% of the national median earnings for full-time jobs.[¶]

According to the 2007 poverty threshold chart (Table 3.1), if a family of four with two adults and two children had a full-time worker and a part-time worker in the household working (at a minimum wage of \$6.55/hour), the combined household earnings would keep the family at \$591

^{*} Henry, J.F. (2007). "Bad" decisions, poverty, and economic theory: the individualist and social perspectives in light of "the American myth." *The Forum for Social Economics*, 36, 17–27. doi: 10.1007/s12143-007-0005-z, p. 23.

[†] Ibid.

[‡] Ibid.

[§] Rank, M.R. (2004). *One nation, underprivileged*. New York: Oxford University Press. p. 54.

[¶] Ibid.

below the poverty line of \$21,027 gross income for the year. Studies show that a majority of the poor do have a family member in the labor market. A 1997 labor market study found that 37% of poor families were in full-time working families, and another 35% were in part-time working families.*

In addition to the low-wage work and the part-time work, there is also a deficiency in the number of jobs available to job seekers. Over 30 years ago, Milton Friedman, Nobel Prize-winning economist, helped develop the concept of the natural unemployment rate. Essentially, a degree of unemployment must be embedded in our economic system in order for free markets to function most effectively. Thus, a certain percentage of people must always be out of work.[†] So the idea that any person at any given time can just “pull himself or herself up by the bootstraps” is not true. There will be times when work, especially sustainable work or living wage work, is unavailable.

Why Is This Important for Emergency Management?

Why should emergency management concern itself with perceptions of the poor, the realities of being poor, and poverty data and trends? How is this consequential for emergency management?

This information is critical for emergency management because perceptions and misleading portrayals of the poor can have consequences. As Clawson and Trice argue in their media study of the poor, perceptions of poverty are important because they have an impact on public opinion. In turn, public opinion then has an impact on public policy. The study states, “If attitudes on poverty-related issues are driven by inaccurate and stereotypical portrayals of the poor, then the policies favored by the public (and political elites) may not adequately address the true problems of poverty.”[‡] The study concludes that public opposition to welfare can in large part be attributed to misperceptions of the poor.

In the case of Katrina, miscalculations, gross misunderstandings, and negligence in New Orleans led to massive failures in evacuation planning and evacuation operations. After the storms, various politicians and

* Iceland, J. (2006). *Poverty in America: a handbook*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, Ltd., pp. 78–79.

[†] Blanchard, O. & Katz, L.F. (1997). What we know and do not know about the natural rate of unemployment. *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 11(1), 51–72. Retrieved April 15, 2009, from Ebsco Host database.

[‡] Clawson, R.A. & Trice, R. (2000). Poverty as we know it: media portrayals of the poor [Electronic version]. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 64, 53–64. p. 61.

Table 3.1 Poverty Thresholds for 2007 by Size of Family and Number of Related Children under 18 Years

Size of Family Unit	Weighted Average Thresholds	Related Children under 18 Years						
		None	1	2	3	4	5	6
One person (unrelated individual)	10,590							
Under 65 years 65 years and over	10,787 9,944	10,787 9,944						
Two people	13,540							
Householder under 65 years	13,954	13,884	14,291					
Householder 65 years and over	12,550	12,533	14,237					
Three people	16,530	16,218	16,689	16,705				
Four people	21,203	21,386	21,736	21,027	21,100			
Five people	25,080	25,791	26,166	25,364	24,744	24,366		
Six people	28,323	29,664	29,782	29,168	28,579	27,705	27,187	
Seven people	32,233	34,132	34,345	33,610	33,098	32,144	31,031	29,810
Eight people	35,816	38,174	38,511	37,818	37,210	36,348	35,255	34,116
Nine people or more	42,739	45,921	46,143	45,529	45,014	44,168	43,004	41,952
								40,085

public officials commented on the lack of willingness of people to evacuate after the orders were given to do so, and cited this as a major contributor to the horrific aftermath. FEMA Director Mike Brown and Senator Rick Santorum suggested those who stayed in their homes bear responsibility for the results of not evacuating and should therefore be held accountable for their actions. Michael Chertoff, director of the Department of Homeland Security, felt similarly. He stated, "The critical thing was to get people out of [New Orleans] before the disaster. Some people chose not to obey that order. That was a mistake on their part."^{*}

What we know now is that while some people did choose to ride out the storm, most people did not leave because they were not able to leave. When people talk about the Katrina evacuation, the complexities of the situation are often mentioned. However, for those that did not evacuate, the answer is quite simple—they did not have the money. In the words of those who did not evacuate:

I didn't have gas in the car and I don't have the money. It's not like I'm trying to play tough. I just don't have the means to leave.

—Tom Pendry, Biloxi, Mississippi

Our family was already in a financially depressive situation before the hurricane. We had \$300 between us. Mom had about \$225 worth of savings. That was our emergency savings for anything. And that was a blessing.... It's hard to just get up and go when you don't have anything.

—Jermaine Wise, New Orleans

These people look at us and wonder why we stayed behind. Well, would they leave their grandparents and children behind? Look around and say, "See you later?" We had one vehicle.... They all couldn't fit in the truck. We had to decide on leaving family members—or staying. I'm living paycheck to paycheck.

—Carmita Stephens

Me and my wife, we were living paycheck to paycheck, like most everybody else in New Orleans.... I don't own a car. Me and my wife, we travel by bus, public transportation. The most money I ever have on me is \$400. And that goes to pay the rent.

* Graham, S. (2006). Cities under siege: Katrina and the politics of Metropolitan America. *Social Science Research Council*. Retrieved April 18, 2009, from <http://understandingkatrina.ssrc.org/Graham/>, p. 1.

—Eric Dunbar, New Orleans

According to the *Washington Post*, Dunbar estimated his annual income to be about \$20,000. Before the storm, when he and his wife estimated how much money they needed to flee the city, he realized that he could not come up with anywhere near the amount of money they would need for a rental car and airfare.*

Chertoff, Brown, and others immediately focused on the mistake of the residents who did not evacuate. It quickly became apparent, however, that the notable mistake was on the part of public officials who were clueless regarding the ability of many to self-evacuate and the underlying causes resulting in the inability to prepare and respond appropriately. In short, there was no good policy in place to address the needs of low-income residents. In fact, it seems that there was no policy at all. Some would probably argue that nobody cared to address this need, as most people were poor. Or as Wolf Blitzer described the evacuees, "Many of these people, almost all of them that we see are so poor and they are so black."† Others will argue that public officials just did not know. Either way, we now know that we need to be aware of how perceptions and misinformation can lead to poor policy or the lack of political will to address a specific issue.

In addition to being aware of perceptions and their effect on policy, it is equally important to marry that information with the realities of poverty in our communities. Specifically, understanding the increased vulnerability of a marked segment of the population, and where they are located or concentrated, is critical to emergency managers. As in every emergency, this information will affect the ability to respond and recover, protecting the greatest amount of life and property. It will also most certainly allow us to better know the true landscape for which we must prepare. As Craig Fugate (current FEMA director, previous director of emergency management for the State of Florida) stated while preparing for the 2006 storm season, "Poverty is the greatest impediment to preparation."‡

If we assume that it was not malicious intent or lack of caring that left people to die in New Orleans, we can conclude it was a lack of information

* Haygood, W. (2005, September 4). Living paycheck to paycheck made leaving impossible. *The Washington Post*, p. A33.

† Kurtzman, D. (n.d.). *Stupid quotes about Hurricane Katrina*. Retrieved April 15, 2009, from <http://politicalhumor.about.com/od/currentevents/a/katrinaquotes.htm>

‡ Robinson, A. & McNeal, N.P. (2006, May 31). Poverty keeps many from preparing for storm Season. *The Miami Herald*. Retrieved August 30, 2006, from <http://www.miamiherald.com>, p. 1.

and understanding of what it means to be poor, how many people are poor, the prevalence of poverty, and the impact these factors have on all phases of disaster. As Fothergill and Peek found in their research on poverty and disaster, while disasters have often been considered status levelers or “events that democratized the social structure,” disasters do not arbitrarily distribute risk and vulnerability or eliminate preexisting socioeconomic conditions.* Many people face daily risks as a result of the social, political, and economic environment that will often result in increased vulnerability. The understanding that there is a strong correlation between the daily hazards one faces and the ability to prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters has not gained widespread recognition.[†]

According to Fothergill and Peek’s review and synthesis of the literature on poverty and disasters in U.S. populations over the last 20 years, socio-economic status is a significant predictor of the impact of a disaster in both pre- and post-disaster stages. They studied risk perception, preparedness behavior, warning communication and response, physical impacts, psychological impacts, emergency response, recovery, and reconstruction. Their review concludes that the poor are more likely to perceive hazards as risky; less likely to respond to warnings; more likely to die, suffer injuries, and have proportionately higher material losses; more likely to have more psychological trauma; and more likely to face more obstacles during the phases of response, recovery, and reconstruction.[‡] It is important to note that while it may seem contradictory for the poor to be more likely to perceive hazards as risky yet less likely to prepare, it makes sense as preparedness requires economic and social resources that the poor often do not readily possess.[§]

The study goes into great depth highlighting both the invisibility of the poor predisaster and the overwhelming task of response and recovery due to the lack of attention to preexisting vulnerabilities. According to an investigation of the effects of Hurricane Hugo on poor residents in South Carolina, it was found that because the rural poor were essentially invisible, living in unmarked homes on unmapped roads, or behind other homes, rescue workers did not know where people lived and that they needed assistance. Emergency response workers stated that until the

* Fothergill, A. & Peek, L. (2004). Poverty and disasters in the United States: a review of recent sociological findings [Electronic version]. *Natural Hazards*, 32, 89–110. p. 89

[†] Ibid.

[‡] Fothergill, A. & Peek, L. (2004). Poverty and disasters in the United States: a review of recent sociological findings [Electronic version]. *Natural Hazards*, 32, 89–110. pp. 103–104

[§] Fothergill, A. & Peek, L. (2004). Poverty and disasters in the United States: a review of recent sociological findings [Electronic version]. *Natural Hazards*, 32, 89–110. p. 104

storm, they had no idea of the extent of the poverty in their very own neighborhoods. A rescue worker stated, "There was poverty here all of the time, but after the storm I saw what I've been living around for 34 years."

Their study also shows that the difficulty of recovery is exacerbated as poor households often lack access to resources and income needed to cope following disasters.[†] In addition, due to preexisting conditions, an event will often hit a poor family much harder. Fothergill and Peek explain that aid agencies (churches, community groups, government workers) are often not interested in dealing with the larger problems of poverty and want to limit assistance to disaster relief. For the poor, however, that is unrealistic. An outreach worker stated:

I am still doing Hugo relief, but in all honesty, many of the things that we are doing are things that pre-existed. You cannot replace a roof on a wall that is rotted, and those are the types of things we ran into frequently because of the level of poverty.[‡]

The reality is that there are high and consistent rates of poverty. Working within an economic system that will always result in some level of unemployment and low-wage and intermittent workers, it is critical to take into account the information uncovered in this disaster research. We must consider the profound impact that poverty can have on all phases of disaster and discontinue the traditional blindness toward disaster vulnerability as a result of socioeconomic status. If we are ever to be truly resilient, we must realize disasters are not status levelers.

Finally, emergency management should concern itself with poverty data and trends, because not only the poor are affected by poverty. When poverty increases, especially at an increased time of unemployment (e.g., a local plant closure, outsourcing, government cuts in spending, recession, stock market variability), public services, especially emergency services, are often more heavily relied upon and utilized by more people. If we are to be strategic in not overwhelming emergency services and making sure that the most pressing needs are addressed, poverty rates and any other social data that indicate a potential decrease in resiliency and increase in vulnerability are crucial information. What they do, in short, is increase

^{*} Fothergill, A. & Peek, L. (2004). Poverty and disasters in the United States: a review of recent sociological findings [Electronic version]. *Natural Hazards*, 32, 89–110. p. 97

[†] Fothergill, A. & Peek, L. (2004). Poverty and disasters in the United States: a review of recent sociological findings [Electronic version]. *Natural Hazards*, 32, 89–110. p. 98

[‡] Fothergill, A. & Peek, L. (2004). Poverty and disasters in the United States: a review of recent sociological findings [Electronic version]. *Natural Hazards*, 32, 89–110. p. 100

our situational awareness, pre- and post-event, a hallmark of good emergency management.

According to Rank, the country pays a heavy price for poverty. He sites a Children's Defense Fund report:

The children who suffer poverty's effects are not its only victims. When children do not succeed as adults, all of society pays the price: businesses are able to find fewer good workers, consumers pay more for their goods, hospitals and health insurers spend more treating preventable illnesses, teachers spend more time on remediation and special education, private citizens feel less safe on the streets, governors hire more prison guards, mayors must pay to shelter homeless families, judges must hear more criminal, domestic, and other cases, taxpayers pay for problems that could have been prevented, fire and medical workers must respond to emergencies that never should have happened, and funeral directors must bury children who never should have died.*

In short, if communities are to best respond to an increase in the need for fire, police, emergency rooms, etc., there needs to be as much information as possible about the need.

Leaders in emergency management often place a strong focus on forward thinking for the most comprehensive emergency management planning. Imagine if someone had been forward thinking enough just to consider the increased vulnerability posed by poverty and coupled that with socio-economic data. Even a small amount of social data would have shown that in 2005, 12.4% of Americans were living in poverty, a not insignificant number. In the case of New Orleans, however, it was even greater, with 27.9% of people living at or below the poverty line, almost one in three people, and many others living just above or close to the poverty line, or having an income low enough to be eligible for public assistance.[†] Imagine if we were able to go beyond simply knowing the socioeconomic landscape and had a mechanism within emergency management to deploy resources to the most vulnerable communities in a mitigation capacity.

Knowing this type of information gives emergency management professionals a sounder grounding in poverty, and thereby arms the key guardians of life and property with the important, on-the-ground information. It is the same type of information that community policing utilizes, the same type of information intelligence analysts depend on, and

* Rank, M.R. (2004). *One nation, underprivileged*. New York: Oxford University Press. p. 110

[†] The Urban Institute. (2005). *Katrina: demographics of a disaster*. Washington, D.C. Retrieved April 20, 2009, from http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/900835_katrina_factsheet.pdf

it is certainly critical to better understanding of “all hazards” in its truest form. Authors of a well-known 1994 poverty and disaster study found: “Indeed, disasters are the products of the social, political, and economic environment, as well as the natural events that cause them.”* In sum, the question is not why emergency management should care about historical perceptions of the poor, current poverty data, and their implications; the question is how we can ignore information so central to the fundamental mission of emergency management.

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* Fothergill, A. & Peek, L. (2004). Poverty and disasters in the United States: a review of recent sociological findings [Electronic version]. *Natural Hazards*, 32, 89–110. p. 89

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