

Crime and Disaster **Eugene Tucker, CPP, CFE, CDRP**

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“The first thing my wife did after the Loma Prieta earthquake was to strap on her thirty-eight [caliber revolver].” This was a comment made by an employee at the conclusion of a recent tabletop exercise. I thought better of asking if she wore her cowboy hat and just nodded in silence.

Crime in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe accounts for more injuries, fatalities, and loss of property than all natural disasters combined. How will this change after a disaster and how should we plan for these changes? This question cannot be answered adequately in a short article but we will attempt to present a useful overview, with our discussion limited to disasters that are not inherently crime related such as a civil disturbance or military action. We will also focus our examination on the United States and Canada and those countries where the sociologies are similar since much of the disaster crime mythology is based on experiences from countries with poor rural support systems (the Armenia, Columbia earthquake and the Orissa, India cyclone where reported looting and violence was rampant, for example).

Some specific trends are hard to predict because they can be affected by micro-sociologies, or are not as well studied. Contrast two different reactions to sustained power outages in New York City as reported by the New York City Blackout History Project:

Well-seasoned after the 1965 blackout, many New Yorkers took to the streets in search of friends, neighbors, candles, and most importantly, an explanation. In some communities, people found solace in the streets, where they swapped stories, chatted with strangers, and enjoyed an unelectrified nightlife. In Greenwich Village, for example, the streets became an improvised festival as people strolled out to witness the city without power. Some listened to news reports on battery-powered transistor radios, and all wondered when the lights would return.

In other parts of the city the experience was starkly different. News broadcasts reported outbreaks of violence, looting, and fires. Areas of Harlem, Brooklyn, and the South Bronx experienced the most damage, where thousands of people took to the streets and smashed store windows looking for TVs, furniture, or clothing. In one report, 50 cars were stolen from a car dealership in the Bronx. The police made 3,776 arrests, although from all accounts, many thousands escaped before being caught. 1,037 fires burned throughout the City, six times the average rate, while the fire department also responded to 1,700 false alarms. Regardless of where you when the lights went out, New York's streets teemed-and sometimes burned-with life.

In retrospect, the social and economic conditions of 1977 provide many clues to the conflicting blackout experiences. The fiscal crisis and the ensuing cutbacks had been precipitated by a crippling economic recession which intensified growing public expressions of mistrust and consternation, leading some communities to lash out in the darkened night. Growing crime rates, coinciding with a City government unable to grapple with escalating social and economic problems, also provided the backdrop for the explosion of violence. Contrasting with the good memories most New Yorkers had of a peaceful blackout only twelve years prior, the garish images of the 1977 blackout confirmed just how much the City had changed in a decade. The "urban crisis" had become a permanent national emergency, claiming New York as its latest victim.

Many, if not most people believe that we will experience massive social upheavals subsequent to a large regional disaster, with bands of marauding youths bent on rape and destruction, looting, and other forms of deviant behavior. In the months prior to Y2K, sales of handguns increased by several hundred percent. On a lesser scale, we are fearful of increases in crime due to power outages, price gouging, and theft. It will be 'every person for himself' with an inward focus for survival. Most will assume that individuals will cease to act in a predictable, orderly fashion. Extensive sociological research lends little credibility to these assumptions.

After a regional disaster, crime almost always trends downward. After the Loma Prieta (California 1989) earthquake, crime dropped in every category except domestic violence (which increased dramatically). I am told that it was the only 24-hour period that year when there were no reported homicides in the Bay Area. Some people will react to a disaster with a feeling of helplessness, fear, and anger. Those who commit domestic violence crimes score very high on their need to control people and situations. Since they cannot control nature, they transfer this 'need' and feelings to those in their immediate surroundings.

Although DisasterRelief.org reported that a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) study on the medical side effects of Hurricane Floyd showed that the hurricane 'triggered a RASH [emphasis mine] of everything from suicides and violent crimes,' the actual report only mentions a 'significant increase' in violence as reported by emergency room visits (assaults, gunshot wounds, and rape) in the week after the hurricane compared with the first week of that month (the week from the prior year is usually used for comparison). The report did not include the numbers or percentages on violence, or list violence in their North Carolina Cause of Death tables.

Crime in tent cities and shelters is less than the norm, especially in light of some shelters mixing members of rival street gangs, with crime returning to normal as time in the shelter increases. Unfortunately, tent city crime tends to be under reported due to poor communications and a distrust of authorities from some populations.

The reduction in crime is due in part to a tendency of people to pull together and help each other (Perkins). This belief is also expressed by Fischer (Millersville University of

Pennsylvania Quick Response Report #177, 1999): ‘The norms which we tend to follow during normal time hold during emergency time. In fact, during emergency time the ‘best within us’ is usually exhibited as we become much more altruistic. Survivors share their tools, their food, their equipment, and especially their time.’

This holds true for price gouging. Although many disaster prone areas have passed laws against it, price gouging is not a serious problem. When it does occur, it is usually perpetrated by outsiders. Neighbors and local merchants rarely engage in such practices after a disaster although it is often an issue reported or emphasized in the media. After the Loma Prieta Earthquake, my parent’s neighbors, whom they rarely spoke with, offered the use of a long extension cord to their backup power generator. Total cost (they did not ask for anything): a twelve pack of beer.

Fraud can be a problem, but is often over reported in the media. State, local authorities, and insurance companies are becoming more proactive at identifying potential victimization by unlicensed or incompetent contractors. Although the author personally knows of several Oakland Hills fire victims who overstated the value of their loss, at least one insurance company chose to absorb this risk than to investigate each claim in detail. FEMA workers have many stories about bizarre claims. The decision to let a supermarket warehouse in Richmond, CA burn may have been insurance fraud, or was it good tactical decision making or good fire ground management? The legitimacy of the flood of smoke related visits to the emergency room by community members with their lawyers waiting outside was called into question by several of the hospital staff (I believe that many of the claims were legitimate). Insurance fraud is usually suspected in other disasters, although most claims are filed honestly.

Computer crime could be an issue after a disaster as companies relocate or rebuild their webs and extranets as some business continuity plans sacrifice the installation of the appropriate protection to speed up their recovery time or to avoid technical problems associated with connectivity and changed locations. Although I have not seen any studies on this issue, we should assume the risk of penetration would continue (I hope I am not perpetuating any myths!).

One element of potential post disaster crime is that built into some continuity plans. I have reviewed two separate plans that instructed team members to ‘commandeer personal vehicles’ and to break into the local grocery store and distribute food to needy employees. In the United States, martial law has been declared in only one disaster. The National Guard is usually present only for traffic control and debris removal. Instructing employees needlessly to behave like Robin Hood can drastically reduce the size of your recovery teams through injury or arrest by the police or military.

Looting is perhaps the most expected behavior subsequent to a disaster and probably the most misreported post disaster event. Surveys indicate (Quarantelli) that 70-90 percent of people in a disaster will hear unsubstantiated stories about looting. After the Oakland Hills fire, one TV station reported looting, another reported on the lack of looting. I was able to inspect one burnt out neighborhood and found that there wasn’t much to take.

The relatively few instances of looting that does occur involve articles of little value and are usually committed by non-local security forces. Similar to price gouging, the media shares much of the blame for this misinformation. According to Fischer, national and network reporters construct news stories that conform to their perception of what normally occurs after a disaster instead of researching facts. Keep in mind that much of news reporting is entertainment focused. If it is reported by and media and believed by the public, local leaders must take steps to respond to it, real or perceived, lending credibility to the assumption that looting is pervasive. The incidence of looting (and other post disaster crime) is often misrepresented by those who have something to sell or a philosophical reason for you to believe in the impending breakdown of the social order. One survivalist web site claims that ‘of the hundreds of victims that I have dealt with [after Hugo], most had lost something to looters. During Hurricane Andrew, looting was common place and accepted as a way of life. One victim from an upper class neighborhood told me “I was shunned by my neighbors because I rejected an offer to cruise for goods.” Substantiated cases of looting after Hurricane Georges: 0. Substantiated cases of looting after Hurricane Andrew: probably 0.

One of our duties as continuity planners is to educate and manage the expectations of the ‘masses.’ Misinformation has caused people to drown in a storm surge trying to protect their property from potential looting. It has caused innocent victims and family members to be killed or injured by firearms. Important sociological and victimization theories do not change – persons are still more likely to be injured by an intimate partner (48%), family member (32%), than by a stranger (20%). Next time we have the opportunity to advise the public or coworkers, ensure it is from a position of knowledge and not mythology.