



Preventing Crimes in Communities Hit by Disasters

Kelly Frailing, Loyola University New Orleans

When disasters strike communities, people largely pull together. In the wake of devastating events like earthquakes, big fires, or hurricanes, they look for ways to support one another, protect what remains, and re-establish a sense of normalcy. But both anecdotes and systematic evidence tell us that there are some exceptions. A few people in disaster areas turn to anti-social activities, including crime.

Disaster researchers now look at the full range of behaviors that occur. Uplifting cooperation follows community disasters, but so do looting; sexual assaults, acts of domestic violence, and fraud. Understanding these phenomena will aid the development of effective strategies to prevent antisocial actions when future disasters strike. Researchers have learned that each major type of crime or antisocial behavior must be understood in its own terms.

Post-Disaster Property Crimes

News reports often feature instances of looting in the wake of disasters that force many residents away from their homes and businesses. However, determining whether looting has actually occurred can be difficult. Physical damage caused by the disaster itself may give a false appearance that looting has happened. Furthermore, many jurisdictions do not legally define looting as opposed to simple theft. Systematic data are therefore hard to find, because the variety of statutes affects police investigations. Most important, both authorities and researchers disagree about exactly what constitutes looting during a disaster.

In order to surmount these challenges, some researchers simply tally burglaries – defined as entering a building with the intent to commit a crime -- as a proxy for looting in the wake of disasters. “Burglaries” tend to be defined in fairly standard ways, allowing for comparisons across disasters and between routine periods and times of disaster. When burglary statistics are used as a proxy, researchers find that prior socioeconomic conditions are associated with burglary rates in the immediate wake of the disaster. The worse the prior socioeconomic conditions, the more burglaries happen in the aftermath of a disaster.

Gendered Violence

Rapes and other sexual assaults can also plague communities following disasters. As with looting, there are difficulties in measuring the extent of rape and sexual assault, particularly when extensive devastation disrupts the functioning of criminal justice agencies. There may be no criminal justice offices or agents to take reports of assaults, and when many people are evacuated to another location, the criminal justice system in that place may be unwilling to take reports of rapes and sexual assaults that occurred in the disaster-stricken area.

Despite these issues, anecdotal reports abound of rape and sexual assaults following disasters. Many researchers recognize that women are uniquely vulnerable, especially if they are charged with caring for children or other relatives and have no means of leaving an impacted area. Women coping with disasters may be forced into vulnerable situations, including when they try to find food and other necessities for their families or look for shelter or transportation out of a stricken area. All such endeavors can put women in contact with strangers, which increases their risk of being raped or assaulted. In addition, it is not uncommon for women in disruptive circumstances to be raped or sexually assaulted by people they know, even people with whom they have established relationships. Indeed, many studies find that domestic violence increases exponentially in the wake of a community disaster.

Benefit Fraud

Fraud also goes up in the wake of disasters – especially instances where people who are not entitled to help apply for and obtaining benefits intended for disaster survivors. There is no universal protocol for the distribution of such benefits, so some nonprofit groups and public agencies may be more affected by fraudulent claims than others. Sometimes benefits are handed out quickly and widely, with little verifying documentation required from persons who claim them. In other cases, disaster benefits are more difficult and take longer to obtain, with a series of verifications built into the application process. Unsurprisingly, research finds that the more difficult benefits are to obtain, the fewer the cases of clear-cut fraud.

How to Reduce Crime in Times of Disaster

Scholars who study crimes in the wake of disasters point to important ameliorative strategies:

- Since poor socioeconomic conditions generally increase the likelihood of looting after disasters, policies that improve people's economic wellbeing can make poorer communities less vulnerable when disasters hit.
- After disaster strikes, special guardianship by law enforcement and related agencies can protect hard-hit areas from property crimes and sexual assaults – although this approach is less effective in heading off upticks in domestic violence. Preventing such violence may depend on making mental health and family services readily available to disaster survivors.
- Extra vigilance by family members and friends can also safeguard people hit by disaster, especially women seeking to care for loved ones. Put simply, community ties of all kinds play an important role in helping people hit by disasters deal with the short-term crisis and rebuild over the longer run.
- Fraudulent claims for disaster benefits can be reduced in a constructive way – by requiring verification from applicants but not dragging the process out. Computerized cross-verification system among agencies responsible for distributing benefits can facilitate both verification and the efficient delivery of benefits to legitimate applicants.

Anti-social behaviors following disasters are not the norm, but they can cause harm and havoc. Fortunately, there are things authorities and communities can do to deal with such behaviors.

Read more in Kelly Frailing and Dee Wood Harper, editors, *Crime and Criminal Justice in Disaster, 3rd Edition* (Carolina Academic Press, 2015); and Kelly Frailing, Dee Wood Harper, and Ronal Serpas, "Changes and Challenges in Crime and Criminal Justice after Disaster." *American Behavioral Scientist* 59 (2015): 1278-1291.