INSTITUTE FOR HOMELAND SECURITY

BUSINESS CONTINUITY AND RESILIENCE IN TIMES OF CRISES – THE IMPORTANCE OF DISASTER PANIC MYTH-BUSTING

Institute for Homeland Security

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Introduction

The popular imagination, disaster management institutions, as well as businesses invested in continuity efforts, often embrace negative perspectives about public behavior in crises. From Hurricanes Harvey in and Katrina to 9/11, reports of panic and looting confirm our worst fears. Even worse, they are manipulated by mass media to sell stories. In Harvey, there were thousands of rescues of citizens from flood waters and many of these were from regular citizens (Baker and Denham, 2019); Denham and Baker, (2019). We came to know them as the Cajun Navy. However, many might not know this also happened during Hurricane Katrina even though mass media focused on reports of looting and lawlessness.

The Science

These misconceptions are due to what is known in research as 'disaster myths.' Some of the most prevalent is that crime increases, panic is common, and that social chaos is normal. This is perpetuated by media reporting on disasters (Tierney, Bevc, and Kuligowski, 2006). One example is Hurricane Katrina and the reaction of top leaders to reports of looting, which were, for the most part, unfounded.[1] Such reactions, based on misconceptions, are problematic. The media's response to perceived chaos only work to stoke sensationalism about looting to the detriment of response, which shifted to an emphasis on social control. However, rescues by citizens during Katrina did occur and reports of chaos and crime in media were grossly exaggerated, as is common in disasters.

Decades of research show the public often re-establishes order and initiates rescue efforts without waiting for authorities. And panic? It does not happen. People act rationally in response to threatening situations. Even crime levels either decrease or remain constant in comparison to normal times. Viewing public involvement as at best inconvenient and at worst a threat, therefore prioritizing and enforcing an institutional response approach built on social control, misses an opportunity to channel and augment a population's inherent desire to reestablish order.

But is human altruism only common in mass disasters? What about other situations where there is no formal governance? William Golding's novel "Lord of the Flies" is held as a gold standard for human behavior in the absence of formal governance (Golding, 1954). The book and film recount a story where shipwrecked boys must reform a small version of society until they are rescued, but their efforts quickly devolve into tribalism, violence, and murder. Dutch historian Rutger Bregman flew to the South Pacific to talk to people who experienced this same situation. In 1965 six young boys who set out from Tonga on a fishing trip in the middle of the night got lost and were shipwrecked on a deserted island. Rather than devolving into chaos, the boy survived by immediately establishing order and setting rules for cooperation until 15 months later, they were rescued (Bregman, 2019). What this shows is, the Lord of the Flies is fiction made up as a story by Golding. What is most compelling, is that informal governance structures were created entirely by children in the absence of adults. This means even children are capable,

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[1] see https://martinlea.com/panic-in-disasters-prevalence-and-causes/

given the right context, of managing successful self-governance and the establishment of order with limited resources.

The popular American imagination, as well as our approach to emergency and disaster response internationally, embrace a Hobbesian perspective: should the landscape of social order be disturbed, what is assumed to be our natural instincts of panic, pillage, and violence takes over (Hobbes, 1651). However, scientists in many disciplines have largely discredited this default assumption of mass panic, finding instead case after case of orderly and helping behavior when a disaster occurs (Haney, Havice, and Mitchell, 2019; Nogami, 2018; Tierney, 2007; Tierney, Bevc, Kuligowski, 2006). Because this fact is rarely emphasized in our narratives, the public and its representatives continue to assume and plan for the worst in humans.

The negative effects of this misunderstanding wear on American social fabric already in need of repair. It influences policies that both reinforce our incorrect assumptions and fail to harness the public's capacity for cooperation when it is needed most. Instead, our policymakers and even business leaders prioritize and enforce an institutional response approach, viewing public involvement at best inconvenient and at worst a threat. This misses an opportunity to channel our inherent desire to reestablish order, in what sociologist Anthony Giddens (1984) calls, *ontological security* or the psychological need for a sense of order humans need to go on. This need is so persistent and universal, that it compels most people to re-create a sense of order in even the most disrupted contexts.

Part of the problem then, is how we come to know about disasters. Ultimately, expertise is either silenced or misunderstood, and stories of discord, chaos, and panic, coupled with public incompetence seem to be more compelling to even the most interested professional. To get past this, we must actively question information we see in mediated popular culture. The results of research on how public response to disasters is contrary to the expectations of authorities because unplanned public responses tend to make dramatic, positive contributions in crises (see Dynes, 1990; Wachtendorf, 2004; Wachtendorf and Kendra, 2006; Kendra and Wachtendorf, 2006; Baker, Feldman, and Lowerson, 2013; Baker 2014a; Baker 2014b; Baker 2016, Baker and Grant Ludwig, 2016; Baker and Denham; Denham and Baker, 2019; Feldman, Worline, Baker, and Lowerson, 2021). It is clear there is a disconnect between the research and what the public and practitioners think they know about the human response to crises.

Practical Applications

The research discussed here uses empirical evidence to advocate for forward-thinking businesses to engage in more effective disaster response in the future. Potential. practical impacts of the project on small businesses are the following:

- Businesses must be flexible in their rules and SOPs during disasters. This will facilitate a more rapid return to continuity.
- Understanding rule-breaking is common from employees out of necessity, not insubordination, and inflexibility on part of business leaders will hinder continuity efforts.

- It is not only organizational leaders who need business continuity. Workers simultaneously balance a need to return to work and re-establish normalcy in personal life. They want to return to work as soon as possible.
- Businesses have an opportunity to innovate disaster response by using evidence-based approaches that minimize myths and embrace altruistic, collective responses.
- Planning efforts can focus on anticipating potential emergent leaders in the organization and the larger community a business is situated, as existing relationships, prior skills, and resources are crucial in disaster situations.
- Building strong networks with community partners, as well as good relationships with workers can only work to create a better ability to re-establish business continuity and resilient responses in crises.
- Businesses can take a central role in organizing community responses, as they often have centralized resources, skills, and capacities that can be leveraged in ways citizens do not have access to.
- Businesses can innovate using scientific knowledge, as opposed to others who continue to remain misinformed about the realities of human behavior in crises.

It is crucial that businesses take a leap forward into innovation and listen to what social science has to say about human behavior, rather than buying into fictional disaster mythologies pandered by Hollywood and mass media.

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