Controlling Disasters: Recognizing Latent Goals in Katrina’s Aftermath

Abstract

Classic sociological theory helps us to understand Hurricane Katrina’s aftermath by recognizing the latent goals (Merton 1949) of social control (Foucault 1979; Mizruchi 1987; Hudson 2001; Garland 2001; Reiman 2007) in disaster recovery. Constructing the survivors as suspect or criminal (Tierney, et. al. 2006; Garfield 2007; Dynes & Rodriguez 2007) and conceptualizing the impacts of disaster as private troubles (Mills 1959) justified the emphasis on controlling Katrina’s survivors rather than assisting them. Parallels are drawn to a paradigm shift in criminal justice from justice to “risk management”(Garland 2001; Hudson 2001). Recognition of the implicit aims of the inadequate disaster response provides a more complete explanation of why post-Katrina efforts failed to achieve the manifest goals of response and recovery. Conclusions suggest ways to ensure more equitable and just disaster responses.

Introduction

Controlling disasters typically means preparing for possible events by attempting to prevent or minimize harm to people and damage to property. Disaster control also includes recovery and response efforts, moving and assisting people and protecting and salvaging property from the effects of a disaster. However, control is involved in disasters in other ways, too. Recently we have seen work on how Katrina and its aftermath have been framed (Dynes and Rodriguez 2007). Framing a disaster shapes how it is viewed, how policy is implemented and how assistance is given (Tierney, Bevc and Kuligowski 2006). Constructing and perpetuating disaster myths in turn influences disaster responses (Quarantelli and Dynes 1972; Clarke 2002; Tierney 2003; Tierney, Bevc and Kuligowski 2006). In this same vein are Stock’s (2007) work on the ramifications of the media’s use of the term ‘anarchy’ with regard to
collective behavior post-Katrina and Tierney and Bevc’s (2007) piece on the implications of the trend to militarize disaster response. All of these are examples of controlling disaster that focus on issues of social control rather than the physical threat or effects of disaster.

Scholars of Hurricane Katrina have pointed out that the response to the storm, and the flooding that followed, was shaped by disaster myths (Tierney 2003; Alexander 2006; Tierney 2006; Kaufman 2006; Tierney, Bevc and Kuligowski 2006; Dynes and Rodriguez 2007; Tierney and Bevc 2007) that set the stage for the prolonged aftermath. Rather than argue that the emphasis on the social control of populations post-Katrina was the result of overt racism, classism or conspiracy (although some perceive it to be), this paper suggests that the actions and inactions of the disaster response reflect a larger cultural trend of the expansion of ‘risk management’ already evident in the criminal justice system (Hudson 2001; Garland 2001).

This work stems from the author’s need to make sense of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. No explanation adequately accounted for the inadequacy of response, the long delays in assistance, the large population forced to migrate to locations across the nation and unable to return home. How could this happen? More important, why did this happen? The explanation that best fits, it is argued here, is that at least some of what were seen as incomprehensible mistakes in the response and disaster relief provision may have had desired, if not consciously intended, consequences. In this light, the endemic flaws in so many parts of the disaster response system reveal a pattern --- in times of disaster some populations are seen as posing potential risks and are therefore subject to more social control than others.

This paper began with my own research on community response to disasters, focused on sheltering people displaced by Hurricane Katrina in rural east Texas (Miller 2007; Miller forthcoming). Since late August 2005 I have been a participant observer in a community that
hosted evacuees. I watched how in my community and across the nation, the media images from Hurricane Katrina were presented as a tragedy, a crime scene, a war zone (Tierney, Bevc and Kuligowski 2006). As Krause (2006) states “…people inside New Orleans came to be seen by some more as a threat than as a population in need.” Attentively following media reports on the aftermath and the circumstances of those displaced by the storm I noted that as the definition of the places evacuated shifted, so did the perception of the people fleeing those areas. Initially the displaced were characterized as people suffering tragic circumstances and devastating loss. Later they were described as suspicious people with dubious qualities and even as potential criminals (Tierney, Bevc & Kuligowski 2006). The shifts in perceptions were reflected in disaster assistance. Generous contributions by many individuals and organizations were replaced with underfunded and unreliable government assistance programs (Miller forthcoming; Peek forthcoming). The end result is that many displaced people did not have the means to return home and are still, more than four years later, struggling to recover from Hurricane Katrina (Weber and Peek forthcoming).

What is presented here is a theoretical framework for understanding Hurricane Katrina. There is now a solid body of literature on the storm and I call upon a wide variety of sources to support the argument. It is, some might argue, somewhat of a leap of faith to rely on information from research conducted by others. However, I believe that enough evidence is presented in the literature to warrant a careful look. It is this process of triangulation that gives broader validity to results derived from very specific studies (Stallings 2006). The goal of this paper is therefore to line the evidence up and offer an explanatory lens with which to view it so as to convince readers to ask “what if social control was the latent goal of Katrina’s ongoing aftermath?” It is then left to others to attempt to prove or disprove the arguments presented here in more systematic ways.
Outlining the theoretical framework

To ground these processes in sociological theory it is helpful to turn to the sociology of knowledge which has as its focus the social construction of reality (Berger and Luckman 1967). This paper asserts that the social construction of disaster myths does not result from a lack of empirical knowledge about disasters or inadequate organizational capacity to prepare for and respond to them (although this might also be true). It is argued here that the way a disaster is packaged and reported serves a purpose. This is true even if, as Fischer (1998) notes, the reporters believe the message. Some authors have discussed how the images shown post-Katrina were chosen because of the organization of the industry and the nature of the reporting business that favors startling, newsworthy pictures and stereotypical frames (Altheide 2004; Tierney, Bevc & Kuligowski 2006). In the case of Hurricane Katrina, myths were circulated for a number of additional reasons. As Dynes and Rodriguez (2007) point out Hurricane Katrina was the first major disaster presented around the clock by competing cable news channels. The catastrophic scope of the damage also encouraged cataclysmic frames (Dynes and Rodriguez 2007). This paper adds another explanation for the persistence of disaster myths. Following Tierney, Bevc & Kuligowski (2006), it is argued that by creating the frames linking mostly poor, black evacuees with civil unrest and crime the media support the control process even if it is done unintentionally. Despite decades of research disproving largely erroneous views of behavior during and after disasters (for example Quarantelli and Dynes 1972; Fischer 1998; Tierney 2003), disaster myths regularly resurface because they help justify the latent goals of disaster response: the management of groups perceived as potential risks to social order.
Identifying the latent goals of social actions allows us to recognize hidden consequences, question their desirability and legitimacy and, if necessary, prevent them from occurring (Merton 1949). Much later Mizruchi confirms that “raising awareness, or consciousness, regarding society’s essential processes makes it possible to anticipate, recognize, and control their direction” (1987: 9). While this paper highlights the latent goals of social control inherent in the response, recovery and reconstruction after Hurricane Katrina, the framework may well be useful when examining a wide variety of disasters.

To sketch a theoretical foundation for looking at disaster aftermath with a social control lens, a modified functional perspective on deviance (Durkheim 1960, Erikson 1966) is adopted. This approach holds that deviance serves a positive function in society by reinforcing its normative structure. Where it is not present, it is created. This perspective presumes a consensus about which norms are to be reinforced and which behaviors discarded. A more critical social control orientation suggests that the normative framework is designed to reinforce acceptable behaviors by those with power at the expense of weak and vulnerable groups. Media images focused on examples of deviance like looting and the capture and punishment of looters not only makes for exciting coverage, it reinforces the definition of looting as unacceptable and warns that violators will be punished. The definition of looting was challenged and racialized when two photos of people wading through chest-deep water received different captions despite seemingly identical behavior. The white people had just “found” food and the black person had “looted” (Kaufman 2006). Regardless of actual events, the perception these images gave was that race was a factor in defining crime even under the most extreme conditions. These images appeared as troops had taken over New Orleans presumably because the large minority population there warranted a dramatic presence of control agents.
The residents stranded in New Orleans and the people Katrina displaced across the nation were treated as a surplus population. In *Regulating Society*, Mizruchi (1989) draws on the control literature to examine how surplus populations are created and controlled. “Short-term or long-term imbalances between people and places—and the consequences, real and imagined, of these imbalances—require some response from society” (1989:9). Large segments of the population of New Orleans were already considered to be a problem before Hurricane Katrina. High crime rates, concentrated extreme poverty characterized some urban neighborhoods and were seen as persistent problems. The following sections show how the definition of a surplus population prior to the storm was then extended to the evacuees: both those seeking temporary shelter and the long-term displaced.

Pre-Katrina New Orleans

Pre-Katrina New Orleans and many of the communities along the Gulf Coast hardest hit by the storm had large minority populations. Sixty-seven percent of New Orleans’ residents were Black and about 30% of the city lived below poverty level: well above the national average (Faw 2005). In a study of concentrated poverty in New Orleans and other American cities Katz (2006) notes that of the people living below the poverty line at the time of storm, 84% were African American. Moreover, “poor African- American households were highly concentrated in 47 neighborhoods of extreme poverty --- that is, neighborhoods where the poverty rate topped 40 percent” (Katz 2005) after the levees broke. All but nine of these extreme-poverty neighborhoods flooded (Katz 2005). Poverty was seen as a crucial factor in people’s ability to evacuate (Katz 2005) as estimates reveal that about 134,000 people in the city could not afford transportation to evacuate (Faw 2005). In addition to the residents of the extreme-poverty neighborhoods,
approximately 6,000 people in New Orleans were homeless before the storm (Ratner 2008). According to Mizruchi’s definition, these areas were home to many people who could be classified as members of unwanted or surplus populations.

Post-Katrina New Orleans

This view of New Orleans’ poor was aired by prominent officials shortly after the storm. The threat of civil unrest loomed large on our television screens. Stranded residents were presented as potential looters and criminals. Dynes and Rodriguez (2007) conclude, however, that “images of chaos and anarchy portrayed by the mass media were based primarily on rumor and inaccurate assumptions” (p. 31). As a result, the National Guard was sent in first to help with search and rescue, but rapidly shifted its efforts toward the need to reestablish order partly based on rumor and media images (Tierney, Bevc & Kuligowski 2006; Tierney and Bevc 2007). The actions of government agencies and the comments of prominent political figures after the storm both emphasize the need to control and even punish. Kaufman (2006) points out that a jail was the first institution to be back “in business” after the storm, even while approximately 25,000 people were still waiting to be rescued. A Republic Senator “suggested punishing people who had ignored pre-storm evacuation orders” (Babington 2005).

News stories collected remarks from others pointing to the potentially positive consequences of the devastation. Republican Richard H. Baker stated that “We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn’t do it, but God did” (Babington 2005). Others mentioned bulldozing part of New Orleans. Although he did not present the idea as a positive change, many viewed the opinion of the director of HUD that foresaw “a ‘whiter’ Big Easy” as an improvement to the city.
Any one of these comments could have been taken out of context and distorted. However, what emerged from reporting on the storm’s aftermath was a pattern of observations on the events and the people involved that defined the devastation as largely affecting poor minority populations. Furthermore, comments tended toward a need for social control and even cast the consequences of the damage and suffering of these groups in positive terms.

The Katrina Diaspora

Post Katrina, the large numbers of displaced from New Orleans and the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina constitute a more permanent surplus population. Groen and Polivka (2008) use Current Population Survey data to estimate that 1.5 million people 16 years and older evacuated. These evacuees were representative of the local demographics (Groen and Polivka 2008). However, there were marked differences in who was able to return within the first two years after the storm (Groen and Polivka 2008: 1). While the evacuees represented every race, ethnicity and all socioeconomic categories, a year after the storm those who had not returned to the city were more likely to be black and poor. According to a Brookings Institution report “Compared with “stayers” in the city of New Orleans, out-migrants were younger, poorer, more likely to be black, and more likely to have children. On the other hand in-migrants were more highly educated, more likely to be childless, and more likely to be white” (Brookings 2007: 1). These demographic shifts are perhaps not surprising given the rhetoric and the selective reconstruction of the city. As of 2008, for example, no new public transportation had been built. Child care capacity in some places of the city was only at 30-40% of pre-storm levels (New Orleans Index 2008: 14). The demolition of public housing that had been a highly contested issue before the storm was quickly executed after Katrina for a net loss of over 2764 units of
affordable housing (Luft 2007). The mixed income properties planned, it is estimated, will
welcome only about 20% of the former residents of the public housing units (Luft 2007). With
over 70% of property in the city damaged (Pardee forthcoming), it is not surprising that rents
have risen dramatically (New Orleans Index 2008: 12). All of these factors contribute to the large
numbers of homeless. Since the storm, homelessness increased from 6,000 people pre-Katrina to
over 12,000 (Ratner 2008). Note that this is an increase of 100% over pre-storm homelessness in
a city that was half its original size (Sasser 2007). New Orleans’ Mayor Nagin made the
comment that one solution to the homeless problem would be to “give them one-way bus tickets
out of town” (Dewan 2008). Later when he tried to dismiss the homeless as outsiders, advocacy
groups provided data showing that 86% are locals and over half connect their lack of housing to
Katrina (Dewan 2008).

Scattered across the U.S. (Groen and Polivka 2008: 8-9) after multiple displacements
many evacuees are still living in a state of limbo, undecided whether to attempt to return to their
former homes or neighborhoods or to establish new lives where they landed after the storm
(Weber and Peek forthcoming). In this sense, many Katrina evacuees represent a marginally
integrated population created by a disaster, eyed with suspicion as different and even criminal.
As with Mizruchi’s groups, displaced people, particularly if they are poor minorities, constitute a
population that demands a response. The response will reflect the underlying goals of those
managing it and the prevailing perspectives on what and who represents a risk.

Abeyance at work

One way to manage a surplus population according to Mizruchi (1989: 20) is ‘abeyance.’
The abeyance process includes “the organizational processes that absorb, control, and expel
personnel as they are and are not needed to fill status positions in society” (Mizuchi 1989: 17). Mizruchi’s discussion of abeyance is linked to the treatment of various groups throughout history. Although he is not focused on disaster survivors, the group he calls “the disreputable poor” shares characteristics with many of Katrina’s displaced and certainly those most visible in the media. Garfield (2007) describes how the media framed Katrina survivors as ‘unworthy’ disaster victims offering a connection to historical perspectives on poverty (Piven and Cloward 1993). Viewed from the perspective of abeyance, the exceedingly slow rate of programs ostensibly aimed at returning displaced residents to their former homes and lives takes on another meaning. Perhaps the length of time serves a latent purpose: to keep people in a holding pattern, away from the disaster area. In pre-Katrina New Orleans major changes disproportionately influencing low-income groups were in the works. For example, multiple public housing facilities were being closed and slated for demolition (Luft 2007; Pardee forthcoming). Neighborhoods had organized to collectively resist these efforts. With the residents displaced or overwhelmed in individual reconstruction efforts since the storm, both of these agendas have been expeditiously furthered.

As in the case of the poor seeking welfare, Piven and Cloward (1993) argue that what may appear to be problems in the system actually serve the latent functions of reducing welfare rolls and deterring all but the most desperate and tenacious from attempting to enroll (147-180). The same may be true for disaster assistance programs. Moreover, social control is imposed on those who receive relief in other ways, too, since they must adhere to formal and informal rules of behavior to remain eligible. Lein’s work on Hurricane Katrina evacuees in Austin, Texas powerfully illustrates this (forthcoming). Disaster survivors are well aware of the negative stigma attached to welfare recipients and distance themselves from the stigma by electing not to
apply for disaster assistance or by adopting behaviors and status symbols to communicate their position vis-à-vis welfare folks (Fothergill 2004).

Additionally, abeyance may be further understood in two phases: expulsion and absorption (Mizruchi 1989: 152-153). Expulsion refers to the removal of unwanted surplus populations either intentionally, out of previous positions into others, or involuntarily without regard for alternative placement (Mizruchi 1989: 153). The latter would best fit people displaced by Hurricane Katrina. In contrast, absorption refers to the welcoming of populations where people are needed to fill positions or the admittance of people into new areas with the attempt to diffuse social tensions by controlling “the dissident or the would-be dissident” (Mizruchi 1989:155). Reverend Jesse Jackson and Representative Maxine Waters interpreted the evacuation of New Orleans’ residents as an attempt to mange would-be dissidents. They charged that “relocating evacuees across the country was “racist” and designed to move black people, who overwhelmingly vote Democrat, out of Louisiana” (Washington Times 2005). The treatment of the displaced by Hurricane Katrina combines aspects of both expulsion and absorption.

Expulsion is the most easily identified of the two abeyance processes. All kinds of people were ‘expelled’ by the floodwaters after Hurricane Katrina. However, the images of the survivors and evacuees became increasingly focused on poor, black evacuees (Tierney, Bevc and Kuligowski 2006). As we have seen above, residents in post-Katrina New Orleans are more likely to be white and more educated (Brookings 2007). Those who stay ‘expelled’ are the people in the groups considered as somehow undesirable or surplus to the new New Orleans. They were moved out without much thought as to where they would go and they are also the least likely to be ‘absorbed’ in their new locations because of the same negative perceptions.
The surplus population was removed, dispersed and is the least likely to return. Although many struggled to be ‘absorbed’ in new communities as fully integrated new residents, their very dispersal has slowed their progress. Being a ‘Katrina evacuee’ evolved into a negative label: one that caused children trouble at school (Fothergill and Peek forthcoming), made it more difficult to rent an apartment (Pardee forthcoming), or to be considered for a job (Lein forthcoming). Therefore, although it is occurring slowly, absorption has taken longer than expected.

Another effect of the expulsion process was to diffuse tensions. Except in the relatively few areas that received large numbers of evacuees, Katrina’s displaced have largely faded from view. The daily focus on making their way in new locations, often in situations isolated from previous support networks, diverts energies away from attempts at organized, systematic collective action. The media have largely forgotten them as “old news.”

Managing post-Katrina risk

The events of Katrina can be better understood by examining the policy climate in which they occurred. Hudson’s (2001) work traces the shift in criminal justice systems in the U.K and the U.S. in the late 1990s from a focus on justice as a guiding principle to vengeance (Hudson 2001: 146; Garland 2001). Today, “risk to the law-abiding public ‘trumps’ justice not only to offenders, but also to others who may come into various contemporary categories of suspicion” (Hudson 2001: 144). In fact, the ‘risk management’ approach (Hudson 2001) to crime control not only blurs the distinction between violent and nonviolent offending, but also blurs the distinction between offender and suspect (Hudson 2001: 154). It is not so much what you have done, but who you are that is judged as unacceptable or risky. Criminal justice now implements policies
that “are very much the policies of containment of the underclass (Hudson 2001: 155) thereby controlling the undesired or surplus population.

At a time when law and order is part of everyday political rhetoric and the criminal justice system has moved toward risk management strategies, post-Katrina flooding drove hundreds of thousands out of New Orleans. The disaster management system at all levels was so overwhelmed and ill-equipped that the military was called in to control the situation. Over 63,000 military personnel (GAC 2006 cited in Teirney and Bevc 2007) were sent to the region -- the largest military mobilization for a disaster in U.S. history. The first to arrive were deployed in search and rescue missions, but the sensational media reports of looting, assaults, rape, murder and civil unrest led officials to redirect military resources away from saving people to emphasizing control and ‘securing the city’ (Tierney and Bevc 2007). Many of the reports were later found to be unconfirmed and unfounded (Times Picayune 2005; Dwyer and Drew 2005). For example, of the reported 200 bodies said to be in the Superdome, only six were discovered. None showed signs of being murdered (Dynes and Rodriguez 2007: 29-30).

Post Hurricane Katrina, social control was aimed at controlling the evacuated population for at least two reasons. One was to diffuse the potential for collective action on the part of those abandoned after the storm and subsequent flooding. Evacuees were sent to all 50 U.S. states (Groen and Polivka 2008) and were isolated from their own informal social networks of family and friends (Weber and Peek forthcoming). Communication with family, former neighbors or even with other evacuees was hindered by distance, lack of information about people’s whereabouts and repeated displacement. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that the hundreds of thousands of people displaced were not able to organize themselves into a unified collective voice to demand assistance or reparations for the inadequacy of the disaster relief and
response efforts. The other goal of post-Katrina social control efforts was to relieve the
government of responsibility for the tragedy of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. As the next
section discusses, individualizing disaster loss goes hand in hand with victimization and
criminalization of the disaster survivors. These similar processes place the blame for the
survivors’ circumstances on their own shoulders. Viewed with this lens, the employment of
disaster myths and the lack of progress in assisting people displaced by Katrina or in rebuilding
New Orleans after Katrina are clearly connected.

Individualizing Public Issues

The context for the creation of frames is important. As Altheide (2002) shows, --- the
media have successfully convinced us to be fearful --- often of the wrong things. Kaufman
(2006) agrees noting the “homicide coverage quadrupled even as homicide rates declined by
35%” in the 1990s. Moreover, “TV characters on primetime are murdered approximately 11
times as often as citizens…. (Kaufman 2006)” How the frames of Katrina are socially constructed
to help control the surplus population after the disaster is explained in this section. First the
evolution of the images is reviewed and then we will link the process to sociological theory to
recognize the mechanisms employed to further create and isolate “the Katrina evacuee.”

After the storm, the dangers of the affected area were covered extensively in the media.
These featured reports of looting and violence that established the survivors of Katrina as suspect
and potentially dangerous, contributing to the rationale for sending in military personnel to
secure the city (Tierney, Bevc & Kuligowski 2006). “Initial media coverage of Katrina’s
devastating impacts was quickly replaced by reporting that characterized disaster victims as
opportunistic looters and violent criminals and that presented individual and group behavior
following the Katrina disaster through the lens of civil unrest” (Tierney, Bevc and Kuligowski 2006: 60). “Later, narratives shifted again and began to metaphorically represent the disaster-stricken city of New Orleans as a war zone…”(Tierney, Bevc, Kuligowski 2006: 61; Dynes and Rodriguez 2007; Times Picayune 2005).

Even as the ‘profile’ of the Katrina ‘victim’ was established as suspicious, media stories individualized post-storm experiences. The distinction between ‘private troubles’ and ‘public issues’ teaches that in order to mobilize people to collective action, an individual problem must be generalized to a larger population facing similar challenges (Mills 1959). Framing the consequences of Katrina in ways that highlight social and economic inequality would reinforce calls for increased government intervention and assistance. If, however, the frames focus on specific groups of individuals, the aftermath is viewed as a series of ‘private troubles.’ The corresponding response is individualized, evaluated and processed on a case-by-case basis and government responsibility and assistance is lessened. Therefore images of poor minorities quickly became the only media images of Katrina evacuees (Tierney, Bevc and Kuligowski 2006; Dynes and Rodriguez 2007). Rumors about dead bodies in the Superdome’s basement, stories of sexual assault and rampant murder received extensive coverage (Times Picayune 2005; Dwyer and Drew 2005). However, even as we were presented with media images of the worst imaginable circumstances caused by the flooding, there was the element of blame of the victims. The explanations offered were that the people stranded in the Superdome were there because they 1) did not heed warnings to evacuate and 2) were ‘guilty’ of being poor. It then comes as no surprise when the sitting U.S. President’s mother, former First Lady Barbara Bush, toured an evacuation shelter and remarked that the conditions might even be preferable to those the evacuees were accustomed to back home. Or likewise when Tom DeLay visited Reliant Park in
Houston where many evacuees first landed he spoke with several boys about how their experience was like camp asking “Now tell me the truth boys, is this kind of fun?” (DomeBlog 2005). The boys, it was reported, “nodded yes, but looked perplexed” (DomeBlog 2005).

Successful Failure

Comparison of the U.S. criminal justice system and agencies tasked with disaster response reveals similarities in stated goals and latent functions. Reiman (2007) convincingly argues that the U.S. criminal justice system benefits (receives greater support and more resources) when it fails (more criminals, more recidivism). Drawing on functionalist theory of Durkheim and Erikson, Reiman argues that crime does play a function in society. In fact, society needs crime and creates it. However, crime and criminals do not simply serve to define and maintain proscriptions and prescriptions. Linking to the conflict perspective, Reiman argues that criminals are created and controlled for another reason: to serve the interests of the powerful.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to argue that Hurricane Katrina evacuees were intentionally defined and treated as ‘surplus’ so others would gain. Some have asserted, however, that private developers and security contractors were quick to seize the opportunity for profit offered by the disaster (Klein 2007). Furthermore, Tierney and Bevc (2007) note how the military greatly expanded its roles in disaster response in Hurricane Katrina. However, the argument here is not about intentionality, but rather the consequences of the events. The outcome of the botched disaster response has been increased investment in the very apparatus that was found to be so lacking. To the extent that political and economic interests benefit from these increased budget and resource allocations, the interests of the powerful are furthered.
“A “Pyrrhic victory” is a military victory purchased at such a cost in troops and treasure that it amounts to a defeat.” (Reiman 2007: 5) It is a technical success whose cost is so high as to amount to defeat. Reiman then examines the inverse situation developing the “Pyrrhic defeat theory.” Here he “argues that the failure of the criminal justice system yields such benefits to those in positions of power that it amounts to a success […] the failure of the criminal justice system to reduce crime is linked to the benefits that accrue to the powerful in America from this failure”(Reiman 2007: 5). What’s more, the very failure is used to justify increased expenditure, additional investment.

As with the criminal justice system’s continual pleas for additional personnel, more prison facilities and increased budgets, similar frames used to justify bolstered budgets for Homeland Security and disaster response. Since 2005, The Department of Homeland Security, which governs all disaster and emergency-related activities, has grown from $40.2 billion to $55.1 billion in fiscal year 2010 for an average yearly increase of 6.5% even in an economic recession (DHS 2009). Klein (2007) makes the similarity explicit noting that the responses to wars and disasters seemed designed to fail stating that the new disaster response is “designed to have no end” (2007:306). Tierney, Bevc and Kuligowski (2006) also note that the abysmal response to Hurricane Katrina has precipitated “new calls for stronger military involvements in disaster response activities. In Katrina’s wake, disasters are now being characterized as best managed not by civil authorities but by entities capable of using force---deadly force, if necessary---to put down civil unrest and restore order in the aftermath of disasters”(2006: 76).

It is not enough to fail. To constitute Pyrrhic Defeat, failure must be framed in certain ways. It must legitimate the current social order, pointing away from the privileged and toward the poor as the source of problems (Reiman 2007: 5). According to Reiman it requires that “the
failure of the criminal justice system take a particular shape. *It must fail in the fight against crime while making it look as if serious crime and thus the real danger to society are the work of the poor*” (Reiman 2007: 5 emphasis in original).

The parallels to the response to Hurricane Katrina are evident. No one would argue now that the disaster was managed in an effective, expeditious way. In fact, it was a monumental failure. In the field of disaster research the reasons have been discussed as mostly linked to organizational theory (for example: Perrow 2006). However, general demands for drastic overhaul of the federal system came only from small groups of people. The blame had been already been successfully placed on the ‘victims.’ Why had they waited to leave? Why didn’t they heed warnings? What was wrong with them? Why are they still whining? Beyond academic and emergency management circles, these questions circulated more freely than demands for accountability and responsibility of the federal government. Pyrrhic defeat theory can be applied to the failure of Homeland Security after Hurricane Katrina. Homeland Security failed to adequately respond to a domestic disaster of staggering proportions but it was packaged as if the inability to help people, and the responsibility for the safety of its citizens even in those dire circumstances, belonged to questionable decisions of largely poor, largely minority, people. The disaster response was a miserable mess, but the coffers of the government structures at fault gained enormously, at least in the short term.

Alternative Approaches to Disaster Response

The response to Hurricane Katrina was shaped by social, political and economic forces generations in the making. It would be unrealistic to think that policy suggestions in a brief
article could address the trends that resulted in the myriad problems evidenced in the wake of Katrina. Furthermore, disasters happen locally. Each geographic, social, political and economic context will provide unique challenges. That said, what is offered here are some guiding principles to help design and implement more equitable and just responses to future disasters. These are not the author’s invention. In different forms, they have periodically been put forth in the disaster literature. However, they are grouped together here for reconsideration in light of the dangers of a social control emphasis in disaster response.

1. Prepare and mitigate first, respond later

Despite the lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina the consensus among disaster researchers is that there is a trend toward fewer resources dedicated to disaster preparedness and mitigation in favor of increased investments in disaster response and recovery that many disaster researchers have argued weakens U.S. capacity to respond to natural disasters (Birkland 2007; Tierney 2005). In light of the emphasis on security issues post-9/11 and the reorganization of all disaster-related issues under the Department of Homeland Security it is not surprising that emergency response and recovery operations would get the lion’s share. This is a dangerous trend. A lack of continual preparedness and mitigation efforts results in ignorance and complacency. When aging infrastructure and increasing population density are added to the mix, it is a recipe for catastrophe the magnitude of which may well overwhelm even the most highly equipped and trained response and recovery personnel (Perrow 2006). More and more frequent calls for increased mitigation rather than seemingly exclusive resource allocation to
response activities are being voiced by disaster experts (Multihazard Task Force 2005; Perrow 2006; Fugate 2009).

2. React to disaster, not myths

When a disaster does occur it is crucial that the response is linked to empirically identified conditions rather than the fear of disaster myths. While looting, panic and civil unrest are possible outcomes of a disaster, the disaster research literature underscores their rarity (Tierney, Bevc and Kuligowski 2006; Dynes and Rodriguez 2007; Quarantelli and Dynes 1972). In a typical disaster, therefore, an emphasis on security, police and military personnel tasked with controlling people is a wasteful misallocation of resources (Tierney and Bevc 2007). In fact, public involvement in disaster response has long been considered desirable since fellow citizens often act as the real ‘first responders.’ Rather than instigating civil unrest, people generally help each other when a disaster occurs. Investing in manpower, equipment and money in humanitarian pursuits rather than formal control efforts would result in a more efficacious and equitable response (Alexander 2006).

3. Focus on human rights: shelter, food, safety

Moving away from the assumption that security forces will be necessary during and after a disaster is also a way to concentrate efforts on safeguarding human rights: equal access to shelter, food and water and safety (Nieburg, et. al. 2005; Sjoberg 2005). Here, safety differs from the security/law enforcement issues mentioned above. It includes all efforts to preserve people’s health and wellbeing and includes evacuation processes and protection from negative consequences of a disaster event. While this might seem obvious it is not. For example, a controversial new policy in Texas would screen people’s
residency papers as they board buses if a mandatory evacuation is issued for south Texas (Gomez 2008; Taylor 2008). Many residents in south Texas have friends or relatives who would therefore be left behind. Such a policy seems to view disaster protection as a right of citizenship rather than a guaranteed human right. This is unacceptable. The United Nations Human Rights Committee issued a report in 2006 arguing that the evacuation debacle was a violation of human rights (U.N. Panel 2006; ACLU 2006). A staff attorney with the ACLU of Louisiana stated that “The fact that the United Nations highlighted this ‘disaster within a disaster’ in its observations affirms the basic value of all human beings; it is unacceptable to treat any segment of society as ‘disposable,’” (ACLU 2006). The provision of basic necessities including evacuation should be couched in terms of human rights to ensure their equal distribution.

4. Avoid individualizing disaster impact.

Certainly disasters impact people differently and therefore both disaster preparedness and post-disaster assistance should be tailored to diverse needs. However, availability of funding sources can be facilitated based on location of disaster impact and by streamlining application processes. While fraudulent use of disaster funds is possible, likening the disaster relief mechanisms to the welfare mechanisms by adding obstacles and shameful degradation rituals is a mistake. Awareness that post-disaster circumstances are shaped by pre-existing inequalities (Barnshaw and Trainor 2007; Bolin 2006; Peacock, Morrow & Gladwin 1997; Klinenberg 2002) will help ensure that disaster survivors are less likely to be isolated, marginalized and blamed for their losses. Keeping in mind the ways in which people’s location within the socioeconomic and political structures shapes the harm inflicted by a disaster, the frames with which it is reported and
the response employed, lessens the potential for individualization and criminalization of survivors.

5. Rebuild community in sustainable ways

If the stated goals of recovery are to rebuild community, some oversight should be given to reconstruction plans. Mileti (1999) is a long-time proponent of the idea of sustainable recovery: rebuilding efforts designed to make communities safer and more equitable places to live. A temporary moratorium on re-districting and re-zoning post-disaster would indicate a commitment on the part of local officials to rebuild with some respect for pre-event demographics, neighborhoods, infrastructure and services. Dramatic demographic shifts due to disaster and subsequent evacuation are sometimes used to facilitate controversial changes in local policy. The demolition of public housing units (Luft 2007; Pardee forthcoming) in post-Katrina New Orleans is one example. These policies were fiercely contested before the storm largely by neighborhoods that were depopulated as a result of the flooding. Zoning laws also are susceptible to major changes after disasters as documented by Klein (2007).

Hurricane Katrina has generated some hopeful signs that the U.S. disaster response system is changing. Two of the most significant changes are the enactment of the Post-Katrina Emergency Reform Act of 2006 and the appointment of Craig Fugate as the new FEMA Administrator (Birkland 2009). The new legislation mandates that the head of FEMA must be a professional emergency manager rather than a political appointee. The other main provision of the act is that the new head of FEMA will have direct access to communication with Congress.
and the President in emergencies. Both are important organizational steps for more effective disaster response.

The appointment of Craig Fugate, seasoned emergency manager for the state of Florida, is hailed in the disaster research and emergency management communities as a sign of a dramatic shift in the federal government’s stance on emergency management. Fugate seems to recognize the importance of mitigation and preparedness efforts which have been considered the stepchildren of disaster initiatives in recent years (Fugate 2009). He also brings a new approach to people involved in disasters. Most notable is his view that public involvement in various stages of the response and the recovery is desirable (Birkland 2009) and not something to be controlled or avoided (Tierney 2006).

Conclusion

Employing images of ‘dangerous’ people immediately after Katrina successfully defined people displaced by Katrina as a ‘surplus’ population. With the threat of civil unrest and violence as a rationale, the military was deployed in unprecedented numbers and post-disaster roles. The social construction of ‘the Katrina evacuee’ made the staggering collective damages into private troubles. The troubles were linked to people’s perceived inability to provide for themselves and couched in terms of moral flaws. In reality they were public issues resulting from a combination of deep social and economic inequality before the storm and serious structural gaps in the U.S. disaster response system.

Individualizing the hardships of the survivors serves to isolate and criminalize the victims. If their struggles are seen to result from their own actions the responsibility of
government for the survivors’ plight is lessened. In terms of recovery, disaster assistance is then decided on an individual case-by-case basis, lengthening and complicating procedures for receiving aid. Slowed recovery, or recovery denied, effectively controls a surplus population keeping them in limbo --- often far from home --- and serves the interests of the status quo in New Orleans. Framing the storm’s aftermath in terms of civil unrest and crime also serves an increasingly militarized disaster response system and a burgeoning criminal justice system. In this light, the post-Katrina confusion and the subsequent inefficiency and inaction of the recovery phase become understandable as latent social control and risk management functions and are even more objectionable.

References


