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Idea Lab

Are You Ready for the Next Disaster?

By ERIC KLINENBERG

Mother Nature goes to extremes in the summer, spoiling the gift of good weather with hurricanes, heat waves, fires and floods. This year she started early. On May 2, Cyclone Nargis laid waste to large parts of Myanmar. According to the latest counts, the disaster left 2.4 million people destitute, more than 50,000 missing and at least 84,000 dead. On May 12, China's Sichuan Province suffered an earthquake measuring 7.9 on the Richter scale. China's state media reported that more than five million people lost their homes; an estimated 80,000 people, many of them children, were killed.

Wealthy nations are much better protected from the so-called natural hazards, but by no means have they been spared this year. Consider the U.S. in June: Iowa experienced a deluge of historic proportions, with large-scale crop destruction spiking the cost of food and raising fears of an inflationary spiral. California, where the driest two months of spring on record turned grass and brush into kindling, endured more than 1,000 wildfires and braced for more to come. On the East Coast, more than 30 people perished during the kind of heat wave that usually comes in July or August.

Is there anything we can do to avert such dangers? These days, of course, extreme weather is only one of the many perils we face. Terrorist attacks or technological accidents involving nuclear weapons; pandemic diseases that cannot be cured; comets and asteroids that could wipe out the human race. We live in an age of risk assessment and risk analysis, when doomsday scenarios have become daily anxieties, and planning for improbable but world-changing events has become a focus of disaster policy.

Now, with disaster season upon us and renewed jitters about a pre-election terrorist attack, government officials and nonprofits are urging us to plan for the next catastrophe. The Council for Excellence in Government offers an online R.Q. test to measure your "readiness quotient." The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is promoting a range of "Cities Readiness Initiatives" for public-health emergencies. And the White House has pledged to "foster a Culture of Preparedness that permeates all levels of society," so that families, businesses and government agencies make emergency planning an everyday concern.

Historically, however, public-preparedness campaigns have proved to be even less successful than the current administration's attempts at disaster relief. The obstacles are formidable. Disaster psychology tells us that few of us judge the risk of prospective hazards accurately, or take sensible precautions even if we do. We may believe that something terrible will happen in our nation or even our in city, but we tend to think it won't touch us directly. Moreover, we're often skeptical of official advice about public safety.

Consider the cold war. During the 1950s, that golden age of trust, compliance and conformity, the federal government encouraged communities to develop civil-defense programs to reduce the harm from prospective military attacks. According to [Irwin Redlener](), author of "Americans at Risk: Why We Are Not Prepared for Megadisasters and What We Can Do Now," surveys at the time showed that although nearly two-thirds of Americans thought that nuclear war was possible, only 4.5 percent of U.S. citizens participated in civil-defense programs, and 6.5 percent "said they would follow instructions of civil-defense wardens" in an attack. Nineteen percent "said they did not know what they would do or they would do nothing."

Even when people live in close proximity to major hazards, they may not take an interest in preparedness. In the 1970s, the sociologist Peter Rossi reported that in California, where he did an influential study of nine disaster-prone communities, "earthquakes are seen to be substantially less serious" than inflation, welfare, crime and even pornography. This, he wrote, was a "truly stunning result."

All of this, of course, predates 9/11 and [Hurricane Katrina](), pivotal moments in America's relationship to disasters and emergency planning. Or were they? In July and October 2005, the N.Y.U. Center for Catastrophe Preparedness and Response found that 50 percent of survey respondents reported their preparedness level as "about the same" after 9/11 as it was before, while 4 percent said they were either "somewhat less prepared" or "much less prepared." A second study showed that Americans responded to Katrina by losing confidence in the government's ability to assist in crises and losing interest in their own.

New Yorkers were no exception. According to another N.Y.U. survey conducted in 2006, 50 percent of residents said they have an emergency supply kit in their homes, yet only one-third of those with kits had enough food and water to last three days. More than half the respondents said that, if they had to evacuate, they would drive or take a taxi, despite frequent warnings about gridlock. Some 36 percent said they have no household emergency plan whatsoever and no way to reunite with family or friends during a crisis.

What prevents us from preparing for disasters? Some of the reasons are readily apparent. Bad advice and false alarms discourage all of us from listening to authorities; the government's calls for us to build atomic shelters or heed code-orange alerts have done more harm than good. For the poor, scrambling to make it

through the small crises of everyday life is far more urgent than planning for a possible emergency, and investing time in preparedness efforts seems relatively unimportant. For everyone, there are opportunity costs involved in preparing yourself and your family for a catastrophe that's unlikely to happen.

But the puzzle persists. The great majority of us believe that there are things we can do to reduce our vulnerability (and our family's too), and we have enough time and money to do them. So what's keeping us?

Rather than speculate, in 2006 I organized a series of focus groups and interviews with New York City residents (some prepared, some unprepared, some who were here on 9/11, some who arrived after). One major concern I heard was that there are simply too many things to worry about. Participants complained about having to prepare for too many specific disaster possibilities and in turn feeling overwhelmed, if not helpless. Their list of disasters was daunting: another terrorist attack, perhaps a dirty bomb that would require evacuation, or an assault on the subways. An infectious disease. A heat wave leading to prolonged power outages (like the regional one in 2003, or the Queens outage of 2006). A hurricane.

The problem, some said, is that each situation requires a different survival strategy. It's hard to keep track of all the details without turning yourself into a survivalist and scaring off your family and friends. If there's a heat wave, for instance, we're told to drink plenty of water, check up on neighbors and go to cooling centers. If there's smallpox or avian flu, we should avoid social contact. If there's a dirty bomb and we're fortunate enough to be far from the detonation, we evacuate. Wait — maybe we hunker down?

This leads to another issue. If megadisaster strikes, many people worry that they won't have access to reliable information on how to protect themselves. After Katrina, there is widespread distrust of government officials and (despite their fine performance in New Orleans) of many in the media too. There's also the question of whether communications channels will be open. Land lines, mobile-phone networks and Internet connections have failed during recent crises. Televisions and computers are useless when the power is out. Not everyone owns a battery-operated radio, and those who do can't be confident that their local stations have reporters on hand to guide them out of harm's way.

Beyond that, many people simply don't want to live in a culture of preparedness. The notion is off-putting, and downright scary for some, because it seems to place fear and defensiveness at the center of our public and private lives. Careful planning means dwelling on the uncomfortable topics of our own mortality, the vulnerability of our loved ones and the fragility of our planet, and there's a psychological price to be paid for that.

It's little wonder that we are loath to acknowledge the hazards we face. It's easier to hope for good luck. But with the threats of climate change, violent weather, unconventional warfare and uncontrollable diseases lurking everywhere, it's hard to maintain a rational case against basic preparedness. We can (and should) argue about the excesses of our new homeland-security policies, but isn't developing a household emergency plan something all of us can (and should) do?

Improving disaster preparedness is not merely a personal matter. Despite recent government blunders, there are many ways that public agencies and nongovernmental organizations can help. Start with the basics. A home emergency kit should not be a luxury item. The Department of Homeland Security, now the poster child for wasteful spending, could work with groups like the Red Cross to distribute subsidized emergency supplies to the poor. It could also do more to train and support the cash-strapped local organizations that protect vulnerable people on an everyday basis, because (as we learned in New Orleans) when disaster strikes, their ability to maintain operations will determine the fate of those most at risk. In San Francisco, the Fritz Institute recently developed the path-breaking BayPrep program, which helps local social-service agencies measure their disaster preparedness and become more disaster-resilient. It should be a national model, not a local exception contingent upon philanthropic financing, as it is today.

We must also recognize that community organization is essential for disaster preparation. The two deadliest recent U.S. environmental disasters, Katrina and the 1995 Chicago heat wave, highlighted the vulnerability of socially isolated people, for whom the safe house becomes a tomb. Efforts to build strong, durable connections among neighbors, local organizations, businesses and government agencies will help improve community resilience in crises of all kinds. Here, reputation to the contrary, New Yorkers are exemplary. Consider the way they supported one another on 9/11 and during the blackout of 2003. Or the fact that participants in my focus groups, even those who were reluctant to prepare on their own, said they believed that they'll be able to rely on co-workers, neighbors and fellow citizens when the next disaster strikes. When everyone has reason to feel this way, we'll be more secure than we are today.

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