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Institutional Barriers to Resilience in Minority Communities

Project Lead

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Statement of Problem

An overlooked source of vulnerability for minority residents of the United States is the degree to which their communities and institutions are isolated from or at odds with the institutions, organizations, and agencies responsible for emergency planning and response. Local conflicts between communities and governmental and non-governmental agencies, distrust of law enforcement and the justice system, and social and political isolation are among the barriers that impair the ability of some minority communities to withstand natural or manmade disasters, yet not enough has been done to incorporate this factor into measures of community resiliency.

At the individual level, the vulnerability of ethnic, racial, and language minority people is well documented, particularly in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. In a country in which minority status is often correlated with lower levels of income and education, the burdens of domestic emergencies fall most heavily on members of groups such as African-Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans and on those whose members have limited English proficiency. One reason for the depth of research into the socioeconomic effects on community resiliency is that these effects lend themselves to relatively easy quantification, usually through the use of U.S. Census Bureau data available at a granular scale.

Individual socioeconomic status, however, is only one way through which members of minority communities are exposed to greater risk. Because of the ways American society is

organized, the community and institutional scales play important roles as well. Residential and social segregation remain commonplace in many parts of the United States, translating to diminished social capital at these levels. From health facilities to law enforcement agencies to schools and universities, minority Americans often experience emergency preparedness through a different set of institutions than white Americans. Barriers and gaps in political, social, and emergency networks impair the ability of agencies to provide relief to vulnerable populations.

If an emphasis on community resiliency is intended, in part, to roll back the federalization of relief efforts and reassert local responsibility, DHS policy makers need to take into account institutional barriers to equal access at the community level. Minority communities left to rely on neglectful or even hostile local institutions may find their vulnerability increased through the devolution of authority down to the local level. A critical first step is to better understand the magnitude and location of these barriers. This research brief examines the literature of the civil rights of emergency response at a new scale—that of the institution and the community—and suggests ways we can broaden and deepen our knowledge in this area, and thus our ability to quantify and overcome these barriers.

Background

Well before Hurricane Katrina, it was widely recognized that vulnerability to disasters in the United States is more acute for minorities. A significant portion of the environmental justice literature is devoted to the differential impact of disasters on minority residents—from the effect of rent-seeking in the housing market channeling the poor toward marginal areas of cities to the limitations that poverty imposes on transportation options and thus the ability to flee from danger. This research established that vulnerability depends not so much on the event itself, but on social, economic, and political processes, which create different conditions through which people experience disasters (Bullard, 1990; Blaikie, Cannon, Davis, & Wisner, 1994).

These processes manifest themselves in many areas. Public health preparedness continues to lack adequate focus on race, language, and culture (Andrulis, Siddiqui, & Gantner, 2007). In one series of studies, for example, researchers found that as the severity of an emergency increased, white first responders offered more and faster help to white victims than black victims (Kunstman & Plant, 2008). The possible racial bias of individual responders under stress suggests that disparities in treatment need to be mitigated at the agency level, with more training or an improved monitoring system.

Post-9/11 work on terrorism preparedness has also found disparities in the experiences of minority residents. In a series of articles, Eisenman and colleagues (Eisenman, Glik, Maranon, Gonzales, & Asch, 2009; Eisenman, Glik, & Ong, 2009) described a situation in which low-income Hispanic immigrants were both inadequately prepared for emergencies and disproportionately affected by them, while different minority groups had different levels of

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preparedness and awareness. Moreover, minority residents were more likely to look upon emergency preparedness with mistrust, perceiving a lack of fairness (Eisenman et al., 2004).

In law enforcement, the different experiences and attitudes among minority residents, particularly African-Americans, have long been a concern for the justice system. Recently, controversies over immigration have added to the estrangement, with many new residents living in fear of deportation and avoiding local and federal law enforcement as much as possible.

A critical component of all emergency planning, whatever the field, is communication. To reach vulnerable individuals, emergency plans must be disseminated through local and state agencies, both before and after an emergency. Particularly for minority groups whose members have limited English proficiency, receiving adequate information is a significant challenge. Even multilingual efforts—because of difficulties in developing culturally tailored materials—often fall short of providing equal information (James, Hawkins, & Rowel, 2007). The problems are not all based on language differences. Survey work following Katrina revealed significant differences in information-seeking between African-Americans and whites (Spence et al., 2007).

Unfortunately, while we know much about the ways minority individuals may have increased vulnerability to emergencies, the literature on what is referred to here as "the institutional scale" (including social institutions, bureaucratic agencies, and facilities) is less developed. Community planning research suggests that institutional linkages are important to readiness. These organizations include local and state government agencies, but also churches and faith-based social service organizations and the private sector. Key to this concept is the notion that rather than simply reflecting socioeconomic vulnerability, these institutions play an active role in either mitigating or aggravating poor community relations.

Health Care Provision

The institutional literature is best developed in health care, where community health centers, general practitioners, and non-profit organizations have been recognized as critical to emergency response (Fowkes, Blossom, Anderson, & Sandrock, 2007; Ablah, Tinius, Horn, Williams, & Gebbie, 2008). A 2006 survey of doctors in rural Texas found that most were not confident in the diagnosis or treatment of public health emergencies among their diverse patient population. The doctors reported communicating in 16 different languages. The authors concluded that there is a need for increased attention to the inclusion of African-American, Hispanic, and minority-language doctors in the planning process (Hsu & Jacobson, 2006). Kirkpatrick and Bryan (2007) evaluated five agencies that provided care to indigent populations in New Orleans in the run-up to Katrina, and they found a breakdown in coordination and communication at all levels of government. In addition to the question of how to prevent such breakdowns, there is the question of how to protect vulnerable populations (such as the poor)

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who are more vulnerable to the effects of such breakdowns. This became readily apparent in the case of nursing homes after Katrina.

Law Enforcement and First Responders

Relations between minority communities and law enforcement are problematic in many parts of the United States. Complaints of both over-policing and under-policing, along with allegations of police abuse, are a common part of the American experience (Ogletree, Prosser, Smith, & Talley, 1995; Carter & Radalet, 2002). The experience of being a minority officer or executive in law enforcement is sufficiently different to support a number of national associations for minority officers and executives. Agencies that serve predominantly minority communities may not be integrated into the law enforcement system as readily as those that serve majority white communities.

Estrangement at the institutional level is both general and location-specific. For example, the decision by the sheriff in Maricopa County, Arizona, to arrest illegal immigrants prompted widespread criticism by Hispanic advocates and resulted in a federal investigation on the grounds that his "enforcement methods may unfairly target Hispanics and Spanish-speaking people" (U.S. Department of Justice, 2009). DHS eventually removed the authority of the sheriff's deputies to make immigration arrests.

Synthesis

Institutions and communities serve as the framework through which emergency decisions are made and implemented. As an intermediate scale between federal policy and action and the individual, institutions and communities can serve to mitigate lack of community resilience, or, alternately, they can increase vulnerability by failing to adequately serve at-risk populations. These communities may include minority-majority jurisdictions or minority neighborhoods in white-majority cities or counties.

While institutional racism is one source of the dislocation of minority communities from the institutional structure, it may not be the primary one. These breakdowns can occur in many ways, including the following:

- **Conflict between minority communities and local agencies and governments**, particularly involving law enforcement. These conflicts restrict the lines of communication between vulnerable populations and those charged with providing emergency relief.

- **Diminished social and resource capital** for institutions serving minority populations. The correlation between levels of social capital and race and ethnicity in the United States extends to the institutional level. Agencies that serve predominantly minority communities may lack the capacity of their better funded counterparts.

- **Inter-communal and inter-agency conflict**, as local agencies fail to cooperate or communicate and as communities within the same jurisdiction remain in isolation. For

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example, rivalries between towns or between neighborhoods, in areas with histories of racial or ethnic conflict, may hinder relief planning and implementation. At the agency level, relations between law enforcement agencies in some places may be prone to disruption.

- **Dislinkages** between levels of bureaucracy, as in cases of poor relationships between local and state government agencies.

Institutions are particularly important as conduits for the flow of information. Lines of communication are vulnerable to the kinds of breakdowns and antipathies outlined above, making it difficult for minority communities to access credible information. For example, social segregation extends to the radio airwaves, where white and minority preferences are "substantially different" (Siegelman & Waldfogel, 2001). Emergency planners have long recognized the need to diversify the media outlets they utilize, but their efforts may not be adequate for overcoming the differences in information accessibility. This is compounded by the different networks of informal communication that may be in place in minority and white neighborhoods—for example, the different ways that segregated churches or schools may communicate about disaster plans.

Future Directions

The lack of a fully developed literature on the vulnerability of minority communities and institutions suggests that their critical role in the provision of services to minority individuals is not well enough understood. Furthermore, there has been very little if any work done on how to quantify these barriers and insert them into metrics that seek to identify vulnerable and less resilient communities.

A first step is to catalogue and model, in far greater detail than offered here, the precise sorts of conflicts and dislinkages that can impair agencies, institutions, and organizations in providing service to predominantly minority communities. This work would describe the ways in which these entities are integrated (or fail to be integrated) into the broader emergency response network. Survey work could help establish both the magnitude and scope of the problem. For example, surveying executives from law enforcement agencies that serve heavily minority populations and comparing their responses to executives from agencies in predominantly white areas would allow us to narrow the scope of our inquiries to those areas where the responses are significantly different. Focus groups offer another way to approach the problem. The same data collection also could be conducted in other fields, such as emergency medical response.

A next step would be to work toward a county- and city-scale metric to identify the types of communities where these problems are more likely to occur. High rates of litigation (for example, against police or corrections agencies) might be one indication of community strife; enforcement actions under federal civil rights laws might be another. School segregation

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measures, extremes in income disparities, or other variables could be quantified to the scale needed to support the insertion of institutional barriers into models of community resiliency. Development of this metric would also help state and federal leaders identify—before a crisis strikes—which counties and cities may need help from the federal government in overcoming institutional estrangement of minority communities at the local and state levels.

Finally, the research would identify best practices and solutions among states and local governments in addressing institutional shortcomings. This step could be based on a case study approach in which successful communities are identified and their practices made available for replication. The resulting "toolkit" could be distributed to local agencies for consideration and could help federal leaders act as mediators in addressing problems at the state and local levels.

The ultimate goal of this line of research would be the quantification of the institutional barriers to better community resiliency for minority communities, and support for the development of a national strategy for overcoming these barriers. The result would be a stronger national framework of emergency planning and relief.

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