

# Covering Recovery

## CONTEXT, BACKGROUND & THE CHALLENGES OF PREPARING FOR MAJOR DISASTERS

The seemingly increased prevalence of catastrophic events, from natural disasters, biological threats, large-scale industrial accidents to infrastructure failure and terrorism, has created many challenges for journalists. Beyond the obvious stories focused on the immediate drama of a massive storm, the threat of Zika virus or the fatalities of a mass shooting, there are deeper issues that need to be explored by the press. These are the investigative reports that will help policy makers and the public understand critical underlying factors, clarifying what happened and what should be done in the future.

Currently, too many questions go unanswered ... even unasked. Perhaps during the critical elections of 2016, some of these issues should be addressed by candidates running for public office.

*Why is optimal preparedness – if there is such a state – so difficult to reach? Why are we doing such a poor job of ensuring that vulnerable populations are protected in catastrophic events? Why, many years after 9/11, is there still evidence of insufficient coordination among and between local, state and federal agencies – as well as with voluntary and private sector entities? Are we providing the resources and leadership necessary to protect from disasters and to minimize their impacts?*

*How do we keep ourselves safe from acts of terrorism, including lone wolf and “known wolf” attacks? Would a ban on assault style weapons make a material difference in frequency or severity of mass shootings?*

*Are schools and other “soft targets” optimally prepared for large-scale events? Why is New Orleans still struggling with recovery 11 years after Hurricane Katrina and what happened to the more than \$48 billion dollars appropriated for Superstorm Sandy recovery?*

*What are the most important steps we need to take to minimize and mitigate the potential of a dangerous Zika epidemic?*

We are in an era of great uncertainty and risk from climate change, increased terrorism, more sophisticated ability to disrupt electronic systems, biothreats like Zika or a potential pandemic, and increasingly fragile infrastructure. These conditions suggest that we will see more disasters and an even greater need for journalists to explore how and why we are so vulnerable, and what needs to be done to make society more resilient and better prepared.

# National Center for Disaster Preparedness

EARTH INSTITUTE | COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

Here are some of the stories that could and should be on the agenda for journalists interested in these profoundly important concerns:

1. Funding for hospital disaster preparedness has been cut by 50% since 2004; for public health preparedness by more than 30% and proposed 2017 budget cuts for counterterrorism efforts (Urban Area Security Initiative or 'UASI' funding) of almost 50%. The scale of disaster planning is already grossly inadequate in nearly every megadisaster scenario. How will these funding cuts effect local preparedness?
2. Planning for vulnerable populations in large-scale disasters is inadequate – representing a major and dangerous omission.
3. Are citizen preparedness programs effective? How do we measure their success? Does it matter how well citizens are prepared?
4. Vaccine development remains primitive and prolonged; it is impossible to produce essential vaccines in a timely manner. Same for other “medical counter-measures”.
5. Failing infrastructure and consequences of climate change dramatically increase disaster vulnerability.
6. Recovery is complex. How do we measure recovery, how to account for perception vs. so called objective measures?
7. How – and why - to find meaningful personal stories about recovery struggles in the aftermath of a major disaster?

For more than 12 years, the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University's Earth Institute has served as a resource for academics, policy makers and journalists seeking background and insights on many aspects of preparedness, vulnerability and disaster risk.

Contact us:

## **Irwin Redlener, MD**

Director

ir2110@cumc.columbia.edu

@IrwinRedlenerMD

Author: Americans at Risk: Why We Are Not Prepared for Megadisasters and What We Can Do Now

## **Jeff Schlegelmilch, MPH, MBA**

Deputy Director

js4645@cumc.columbia.edu

## **Sabine Marx, PhD**

Director of Research

sm2234@cumc.columbia.edu