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LOOTING AND ANTISOCIAL  
BEHAVIOR IN DISASTERS

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#### LOOTING AND ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIOR IN DISASTERS

Does looting (the stealing of goods) and other antisocial behaviors (such as violent crimes) occur in disasters? A widespread belief exists that such behaviors are common in the emergency time periods of community crises created by natural and technological disasters. However, extensive social science research undertaken since the end of World War II lends little support to such a supposition. During the emergency period of disasters, these behaviors are rare, at least in Western type societies, that is, highly urbanized and industrialized developed countries. The belief in their common occurrence is part of what researchers call "disaster myths."

Especially to inexperienced officials and journalists, disasters are thought as offering maximum opportunities for the surfacing of antisocial behavior. It is speculated that survivors are the easy target for looting and other criminal activity. The imagery is that as Mr. Hyde takes over from Dr. Jekyll at the time of the emergency, property crime rates will rise, violent crimes will increase, and exploitative behavior will spread. However, the research evidence lends almost no support to these notions.

In almost all disasters, many stories of looting circulate and almost everyone in a stricken area will hear some of them (surveys typically find that 70 to 90 percent of impacted populations will have heard such stories). Typically, too, press accounts will

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highlight reports of looting and/or the deployment of security forces to prevent expected looting (the story that there was no looting is often presented as a newsworthy item because presumably, it's absence is so atypical). Even social control agency officials may believe popular stories of looting despite the fact that they may have no reports from their own forces. So pervasive is the belief, that security forces almost always deploy extra personnel to prevent looting, a measure often expected by the public at large.

However, in the typical community disaster, looting at the time of the emergency is not a problem; often, apparently, not even a single case occurs. Such instances as do occur are not numerous, usually involve articles of little value (often picked up as souvenirs by sightseers), and are committed by outsiders to the community--occasionally by members of non-local security forces brought in to maintain security!

Sometime the widespread looting that occurs in many civil disturbances and riots are extrapolated to disasters. But the two situations differ fundamentally. Looting in civil disturbances (such as occurred in America in the late 1960s) is widespread, collective, and public, being undertaken by local residents who are selective in their activity and who receive community support for their actions. In contrast, such looting as occurs in community disasters is very limited, individual, and private, generally engaged in by outsiders to the community taking advantage of

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certain situational opportunities, but who are strongly condemned for their actions.

Only in very rare occasions, such as happened in St. Croix in the US Virgin Islands after Hurricane Hugo, an extremely unusual combination of social circumstances, may generate in a disaster the looting patterns seen in civil disturbances.

In typical disasters too, there is not an upswing in violent crimes, such as murder, during the height of the emergency period. Stories of fingers being cut off the dead to obtain rings and of rapes of disaster survivors, for example, were relatively frequent in some major past American disasters, but such reports have almost disappeared from popular circulation after World War I.

Research has also found that during disasters, standard crimes as a whole drop, some substantially, below the usual everyday rates whether this be in terms of what is reported to the police or in terms of arrests made. While a drop could be partly attributed to a failure of the police to uphold certain laws during the emergency period (e.g., parking violations), this would hardly explain a usual decrease across-the-board. Furthermore, survey and other data from affected populations do not indicate that they suddenly become major victims of a range of crimes.

During the emergency, victims as well as early arriving helpers from the outside, may engage in behaviors that technically are illegal. For instance, informal search and rescue efforts might involved breaking into locked buildings, or cars used in

transporting emergency supplies or the injured might be driven in ways that clearly violate traffic regulations and codes. But, given the crisis, such kinds of actions are never seen as illegal acts by the violators, law enforcement officers, community officials or the public at large.

Overall, prosocial rather than antisocial behavior is the dominant characteristic of the emergency time period. If disaster unleashes anything, it is less criminality than altruism.

There can be instances of criminal and antisocial behaviors associated with the recovery periods of disasters. For example, false claims for damages incurred, illegal obtaining of relief supplies, and failure to provide contracted repair services, do sometime occur and on a large scale. But these are not emergency time behaviors: they appear in the early stages of the recovery period. Even extremely rare disorderly gatherings, only appear after the emergency periods of disasters (e.g., at protest meetings over housing or relief goods distribution problems). Then there are long before a disaster instances of criminal and antisocial behavior, such as failures of contractors to adhere to building codes or land use regulations, which can result in massive damages and casualties at times of impact.

Finally, one possibility for the appearance of high individual criminal behavior activities should be noted. In some communities there are normally very high everyday rates of stealing and weak social sanctions against such behavior. If a major disaster were

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to impact such a locality, just continuation of normal patterns would result in high rates. The disaster might not generate any new criminal behaviors, but could be misinterpreted as doing so. While the few instances of this kind observed so far have been outside of the United States, in a few developing countries, such a pattern could appear in future American disasters.

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