

DISASTER RESEARCH CENTER
THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY
COLUMBUS, OHIO 43201

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THE FUNCTIONING OF LOCAL CIVIL DEFENSE IN DISASTERS

by

Russell R. Dynes
Department of Sociology
Disaster Research Center
The Ohio State University

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This paper focuses on the functioning of local civil defense units in natural disaster. With this focus, however, certain implications can be derived which can be projected into the more inclusive context of probable operational problems which might occur in a nuclear situation. The basic assumption made here is that the range of problems experienced by the local civil defense unit in a disaster setting would be similar to those which would be encountered subsequent to a nuclear catastrophe. Where there are differences, they can be visualized primarily as one of degree. With the exception of the specific form of secondary threat, i.e. radiation and the probability that a wider geographical area will be involved, a nuclear explosion would not create essentially different problems for community response.

Given this assumption of similarity, it is perhaps appropriate to review some of the more problematic aspects of the operation of civil defense in disasters. Many of them, but not all, could be expected to be problematic in nuclear situations. It is perhaps well to remember that civil defense has been traditionally oriented toward potential nuclear situations rather than other types of community emergency. In addition, civil defense in these nuclear situations was visualized as constituting any and all emergency actions, not just those actions engaged in by the identifiable community unit called Civil Defense. The local civil defense director was seen as constituting the chief of staff to the officials of civil government in such emergency situations. How these expectations about the role of civil defense are realized in disaster emergencies will provide some insight into its potential role in nuclear emergencies.

It is perhaps necessary to point out that one of the "difficulties" local civil defense units have experienced in operating in natural disasters is that national policy is primarily nuclear oriented. Local and state agencies, however, are permitted and indeed encouraged to become involved in other types of emergencies, including disasters. This discontinuity between national and local "policy" provides an initial problem which provides a degree of ambiguity in conceptions of community responsibility. This ambiguity would, of course, be resolved in operations subsequent to a nuclear catastrophe. Other problems, however, would not be resolved in the same way.

Community Perceptions of Civil Defense

First and critically important in the pattern of emergency operations is the way in which civil defense is viewed at the local community level. Based on the experience in disasters, there is a tendency for organizational officials, both governmental and non-governmental, to see civil defense, not as the function of civil government in emergency, but as constituting a separate emergency organization. This perception, of course, determines how other organizations respond to the entity called civil defense. For example, the police department relates, as an organization, to another organization called civil defense rather than considering their own police activities as a part of the "overall" civil defense effort.

While Civil Defense is seen as an organizational entity, this entity is also

viewed as not possessing particularly significant resources to be used in emergencies. In other words, other organizational personnel within the community tend to see it as being "weak." both in its material resources and in its capacity to provide manpower and/or leadership.

In addition to being seen as an organizational entity, the civil defense office is also seen as being a "national" organization, as contrasted with a local one. Most emergency organizations, such as police, fire, and hospitals, have deep community roots which result in the generation of community pride and possession. While, in many ways, civil defense is just as local, the identification with national problems and the partial support provided from outside the community tends to reduce the strong community identification for civil defense. This lack of support and the lack of clarity as to the civil defense role within the community emergency pattern tends to exclude it from constant consideration as being an integral part of emergency effort within the community.

In large part, the lack of clarity of the function and role of local civil defense is characteristic of a situation which emerges when any new form of organization is created. New organizations have to create new relationships with others. Usually these relationships are developed on the basis of some exchange of mutual advantage. Most traditional community organizations perhaps find it difficult to understand the reciprocal advantages to be derived.

Functioning of the Civil Defense Unit in Disaster

The uncertainty of the role of civil defense in community disasters on the part of other community organizations is reflected in internal operations of the civil defense unit. This uncertainty is heightened by the ambiguity between national and local policies of involvement. While local CD directors may be more certain of their potential role in a nuclear situation, they are likely to be less certain of their role in disasters. This lack of certainty may be increased by his definition of the uniqueness and of the lack of similarity of nuclear situations to disaster operations. The uncertainty is also aggravated by the fact that other emergency organizations within the community see the role of civil defense as being different from the way that the local CD director sees it.

The ambiguity of the role of the CD director in local government is also important as background to understanding the functioning of CD in disasters. Particularly in a small community, the person who fills this position may be the sole continuity between the pre-disaster office and the post-disaster organization. His role then is of critical importance. Based on the concern for the possibilities of nuclear attack, local governments were encouraged by a variety of means ranging from moral to financial, to institute a new municipal role -- that of local CD director. While the initiation of any new municipal function takes time to become institutionalized there is added difficulty in institutionalizing a role which is to be activated primarily in the future. Consequently, it was often difficult to get local governments to allocate extensive resources, even with Federal help. As a local official with no immediate operating responsibility and with minimum local support, the position came to have relatively low prestige within the local government hierarchy. Compared with other municipal positions, there were both limits as well as the minimum of opportunities to accumulate political power. Too, as we have already indicated,

Federal support which helped initiate and maintain the position carried with it the impression that civil defense was more of a Federal than a municipal concern.

As a result of all of these factors, the role of the local civil defense director was vaguely defined and not clearly understood, both by other municipal officials as well as by the general public. While the local director might have his emergency responsibilities legally defined, his position is usually structurally weak. He cannot depend on tradition to validate his authority nor does he have visible resources available to strengthen his position. To assume that this relatively weak position within the local governmental structure would change to a dominant, perhaps even central position in emergencies is, of course, unrealistic. While disasters are often assumed to create dramatic changes, they seldom do. There is greater continuity to community evaluations and actual behavior in post-disaster situations than is commonly imagined, so a weak position is seldom strengthened in such circumstances.

In emergency conditions, the anticipated role of the local CD director was seen as being chief of staff to the recognized municipal officials, particularly the mayor. In actual practice in disasters, this pattern of assistance does not seem to develop. There seem to be two major reasons for this. First, mayors seldom play the dominant coordinating role in disasters which are envisaged for them. This does not imply that they play no important function. They do. Perhaps the best way to visualize a role played by mayors in disasters is to suggest they play a "symbolic" function. They tend to symbolize the unity and continuity of community life. Their concern, as expressed on television, radio and other public appearances, is one of reassurance and maintaining morale while identifying with the tragedy and suffering which cuts across the community. In many respects, the mayor seems to assume the "emotional" leadership within the community. This is a role that cannot be assumed by others within the community quite as easily. No one else symbolizes the total community in the same way that the mayor does, although other elected officials, clergy and mass media personnel, also can contribute to this function. Since the mayor cannot be "replaced" in this role, this means that he does not often become involved in operational tasks and in tasks of coordination. Much of this responsibility then tends to fall on the local CD director.

There are two other forces which tend to push the local CD director into operational tasks, subsequent to disaster impact. First, psychologically, it is difficult to maintain an advisory position. There are pressures on all organizational officials to "do something." Advising and acting as chief of staff to other municipal officials is seldom perceived by local CD officials (and by others viewing him) as "doing something." This pressure tends to move him into more concrete operational tasks. A second, more important factor pushing the CD director to assume operational tasks is the fact that disasters create many problems which are new and outside the domains of traditional emergency organizations. Most emergency organizations define and prescribe the scope of their activity, either in their organizational charter or by common agreement. Fire departments fight fires; police departments do not, etc. Many disaster tasks, however, often fall between existing organizational responsibilities or are new and, thus, are the responsibility of no traditional organization. Civil defense directors by "default" become involved in these unwanted tasks. Personnel have to be recruited to perform these tasks. These personnel, in effect, become a part of the civil defense organization. And the CD director has to assume his own "organizational" problems.

Problematic Tasks

The tasks which most often become the "responsibility" of the Civil Defense organization are (1) information collection and dissemination, (2) search and rescue, and (3) control and coordination of emergency activities.

Generally, no traditional organization within the community sees as its emergency responsibility the collection of information as to what has happened to the community. Each organization tends to collect information which is particularly relevant to their own operations. This means that knowledge about the effect of impact is diffused throughout the community but nowhere in the community is this information collected, collated and stored. After a period of time, when community officials attempt to make emergency plans, based on incomplete information as well as the duplication of effort, there is the attempt to centralize the information already collected and to fill in the gaps where it is non-existent. Such a responsibility often falls to Civil Defense.

As this information becomes available, organizational officials, as well as the general public, seek it out. Civil Defense often finds that it is responsible for providing news for the mass media, requests for specific types of equipment, inquiries about victims and potential victims from relatives and friends, the determination of the truth value of certain reports, etc. In order to fulfill these requests, some type of organizational structure has to be provided to receive and process information. Thus, local Civil Defense becomes operational. (Sometimes of course, this task is not assumed by CD nor by any other organization within the community.)

A second set of tasks which often become the responsibility of an operational CD is search and rescue. While other emergency organizations often have rescue operations as a responsibility, their expectations are to engage in such tasks on a limited basis, primarily as an adjunct to their major responsibilities. This seems to characterize the attitudes of fire and police departments. In instantaneous-diffuse disasters, the scope of damage often presents a vast area to be searched for potential victims. At the same time, there are many obvious tasks which seem relevant to the major responsibilities of police and fire departments and to which personnel of these organizations become committed. Rescue activities, thus, are conducted somewhat haphazardly and consistent search activities are often non-existent. When this becomes apparent, Civil Defense organizations often assume this responsibility. And, again Civil Defense is pushed into operational tasks.

The third area when Civil Defense becomes operational is in terms of what might be called the control and coordination of emergency activities. At the site of disaster impact, the involvement of many different organizations with their personnel is necessary since many different skills are needed to solve the problems which have been created. Civil Defense "officials" that is, persons identified with the Civil Defense organization, often become involved in the process of attempting to keep this effort moving. At a different level, one in which the total needs and efforts of the community have to be considered, there are emergent problems of coordination of effort. Again, Civil Defense officials often become involved. It is at this level that the Civil Defense director comes closest to the expected chief of staff role. The role of the mayor in such situations, however, varies. The efforts at coordination which emerge in

disasters is most likely to take on the form of a very complex "brokerage" system where the involved organizations exchange information, goods, services and credit. The local Civil Defense director often provides the facilities and the setting in which this exchange can take place.

There are other tasks which have become the responsibility of local civil defense. In general, one could say that local civil defense is likely to assume tasks which emerge in disaster situations which are not considered the responsibility of any other existing emergency organization within the community. In this sense, the local unit has to assume, as operational tasks, "unwanted" and "residual" responsibilities.

The actual tasks assumed would depend primarily on two factors -- the nature of disaster impact which might create special unanticipated problems and the "coverage" of responsibilities of existing community organizations. In the final "assignment" of responsibility, it is predictable that a certain amount of tension will develop between Civil Defense and the two other community organizations -- the police department and the Red Cross. This is because these organizations have a broad emergency mandate and, even though they may not assume operational responsibility for a particular task, they may resent the assumption of this responsibility by another organization.

It is perhaps important to add that the optimum condition which tends to produce operational tasks for the local civil defense units is the diffuse type of disaster. Widespread community impact, which can result from earthquakes, hurricanes, etc., would also be characteristic of nuclear impact. In addition, a diffuse type of disaster is likely to create the conditions in which disaster operations are most difficult. Damage to communication and transportation facilities present barriers for mobilization, the collection of information, adequate search and rescue, and control and coordination.

It is also important to note that in the "design" of civil defense for the local community, it was not anticipated that the local unit would have extensive operational responsibilities. We are suggesting that it does in disaster. This is implied in the suggestion of a shift from "office" to "organization". This means that personnel have to be recruited for these tasks and the local director becomes involved in a series of problems which attend the expansion of organizations -- recruitment, mobilization, training, task assignment, etc. These operational tasks have to be assumed in addition to the advisory tasks which he anticipates. This means that he has more responsibility than he anticipated. In addition, since he is involved in operational tasks, there is generally no provision for back-up personnel or shift personnel to replace him. Since most disaster emergencies extend over a period of time, the problem of fatigue becomes most critical for the person who may have the greatest "overall" responsibility.

While the previous sections have concentrated on certain problematic aspects of civil defense involvement, it is also useful to explore the conditions in which local civil defense units have "successfully" become involved in emergency activities in disasters since this will provide insight into their anticipated role in a nuclear situation.

Conditions of Successful Civil Defense Involvement in Disasters

Perhaps the best overall generalization which can be made concerning the successful involvement of civil defense organizations in disaster is that their degree of success is dependent upon their ability to provide the local community with resources which are necessary for emergency activity. These resources can be in the form of the skills and knowledge of personnel or in the form of equipment and facilities.

The conditions which are most likely to be productive of successful involvement are as follows:

1. that local civil defense has developed previous experience in handling community disasters. There are two aspects to this. First, the fact of previous involvement, in most instances, indicates the accumulation of experience in the definition of responsibility, the identification of tasks, and the practice of coordination. Second, disaster experience provides the opportunity for other community emergency organizations as well as the general public to see the utility and competence of local civil defense.
2. that municipal government provides a structure which accepts and legitimizes the civil defense function. Local civil defense directors are found in different governmental units and in different "levels of importance" within these structures. This is due to the fact that there is considerable diversity in municipal administrative forms. For example, some directors are organizationally isolated from the major daily activities of a municipal government. This rather marginal position could perhaps be justified from the viewpoint of efficient municipal administration. A position which has responsibility for events which are both problematic and in the future is not as organizationally important for municipal administration as those offices concerned with continuous daily municipal responsibility -- e.g. the maintenance of public order, the collection of garbage, the maintenance of streets, the provision of public utilities, etc. By contrast, if the position of civil defense director is structured so that the person is involved in the daily on-going process of municipal administration, this tends to create a situation in which his function is both appreciated and utilized when emergencies do occur. Attempts to integrate his function into municipal operations become very problematic during an emergency when operational demands are pressing. If this integration has already taken place through previous involvement, then the operational demands can be more easily handled.
3. that the local civil defense director has the ability to generate significant pre-disaster relationships among those organizations which do become involved in emergency activities. In large part, this condition is more easily achieved as an extension of the previous one. If local directors are structurally integrated into municipal administration, they are more likely to develop the contacts which are necessary to develop effective coordination. In certain instances, however, local directors through their long tenure, active involvement, emergency experience, previous community contacts and/or individual

abilities are able to develop a network of personalized relationships with persons in other community agencies which serve as a basis for the development of coordination in future emergencies. The development of coordination is perhaps most directly related to the importance given the civil defense position within municipal government but, in certain instances the development of these personal relationships provides a secondary basis upon which coordination can be built.

4. that emergency relevant resources, such as an Emergency Operations Center, be provided and the knowledge of the availability of these resources is widespread through the community. There are certain resources which are normally not a part of any emergency organization within a community. These resources may be considered to be luxuries in the sense that their infrequent use does not justify their maintenance in terms of the central organizational goals. There are other resources which are not necessary to any one organization but are significant in any type of overall community effort. Local civil defense can provide such resources as a part of the overall community effort. One specific example of relevant resources would be the development of emergency operations centers. While these EOC's are often justified on the basis of maintaining communications capabilities, the major importance is in providing a location for the reception and storing of information and, as a by-product of this, the center for coordination of the complex brokerage system which develops among the various involved organizations. If relevant information is available, these EOC's become centralized locations for the coordination process. If such facilities are made available and are used by communities in actual emergency situations, they generally demonstrate their usefulness. Sometimes, however, these EOC's are seen primarily as locations for technical communications facilities and the space necessary for becoming a logical center of activities is not available. Consequently, they can become the mere location of the technical transfer of information without being utilized to guide and coordinate activity. In any case, the provision of community relevant resources such as a fully functioning EOC is one of the important ways in which civil defense exercises its responsibility.