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#21

THE NATURE AND SCOPE OF CURRENT
LOCAL DISASTER PLANNING
IN AMERICAN COMMUNITIES*

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Recently the Disaster Research Center undertook, as part of its general research, a series of field studies on community disaster planning around the country. One of the major findings was that communities differ in relation to the status of their current planning. In fact, it may be more accurate to talk about multiple layers of planning which exist within each community. These multiple layers can perhaps be illustrated by the following figure.

Figure 1

Scope and Extensiveness of Disaster Planning Within the Local Community

		Extensiveness	
		Single Organization	Multiple Organizations
Scope	Single Agent	(I) Specific plan: e.g., police civil disturbance plan	(III) Inclusive plan for specific agent: nuclear defense plan
	Multiple Agents	(II) Extended plans: police plans for natural disaster and civil disturbance	(IV) Comprehensive plan: multiple agent and organization

If one observes a specific community, the extent of disaster planning is likely to include elements from at least three of the four categories. Most frequent would be (I) specific organizational planning involving a single agent and a specific organization, such as the civil disturbance plan which might be developed by a police department or a natural disaster plan which was developed by a local Red Cross unit. Many of these organizations, however, have over the years developed a more generalized plan which they feel to be applicable to a wider range of agents (see II). For example, police departments may develop an emergency operations plan which they feel will be applicable to a wide variety of emergencies. Similarly, hospitals, fire departments, and other organizations within the community which deal with emergencies on a somewhat routine basis may develop a more inclusive plan to deal with diverse types of disaster agents.

On occasion, there may have been significant attention given on the part of a variety of community organizations to a specific disaster agent (III). This would be most descriptive of earlier attempts on the part of civil defense offices to develop planning for nuclear attack among a broad range of community organization. A similar effort took place in many American cities during the 1960's in reference to civil disturbances. A broader range of community organizations became involved in planning in conjunction with other segments within the community. Some of this planning involved agencies, e.g., human relations councils, etc., which previously had never been involved in emergency planning. The last category (IV) is best described as comprehensive community planning for emergencies. This type of planning is perhaps still more of an ideal than an actuality in the various communities we studied. On the other hand, we could see evidence of developments in all three of the other categories within the communities we studied.

Perhaps the most accurate analogy which can be made to describe disaster planning in a particular community is one which likens it to geological strata. Every planning effort from the past leaves some trace or residue and some even leave a stratum. Each of these efforts and residues are combined with other more recent planning attempts. The previous planning and the more recent planning seldom are incorporated so that planning is "added on" and the result is a "layering" effect. This layering effect, however, is filled with "fault" lines. These fault lines are created by the differential attention given to certain disaster agents in planning -- the focus of disaster planning -- as well as the differential attention to disaster planning which has been given by various community agencies -- the locus of disaster planning. Each of these dimensions will be discussed further.

The Focus of Disaster Planning

Every community reflects in its history periods in which interest and effort is directed toward one or another disaster agent. Each interest and effort has its own history and impetus. For example, almost every community has a residue left by the interest and effort in nuclear preparation. Stemming from the encouragement of the federal government as well as local concern, communities often have written plans, trained personnel in radiological monitoring, designated shelter locations, developed warning systems, and a variety of other "traces" from this period. In these same communities, there may have been sporadic and recurrent attempts to deal with a particular disaster agent which created special vulnerabilities for the community. Communities along waterways have developed certain types of planning for floods. Communities in coastal areas developed planning for hurricanes or tsunamis. Communities in high risk earthquake belts were concerned about earthquakes. Other areas and communities focused on tornadoes. These concerns result sometimes in written plans, special equipment and a continuous sensitivity to such threats.

Certain types of "objective" threats to particular communities were often ignored and given little, if any, attention. During the

late 1960's, many communities became concerned with the emergence
of civil disturbances and often embarked on extensive planning for
that type of "emergency." In all of these instances, the planning
efforts were directed toward specific agents and specific effects.
For the most part, the activities were sometimes justified on the basis
that the "current" effort in planning would generalize to all other
disaster agents and all other potential situations. This argument
was often used in reference to planning for nuclear attack.
The argument of "generalizability" was increasingly used when the
initial interest in nuclear planning began to wane. In any case,
planning within these communities tended to be episodic—effort
focused on a particular situation or a specific agent. Each
effort showed little continuity to previous efforts in the sense
that it involved a different combination of community elements than
had the previous effort.

The Locus of Disaster Planning

Another critical dimension in reference to disaster planning
has been differences in the location of the social unit in which
planning had taken place. Again the reasons for this are many -- various
types of governmental structure, different interest, differential
responsibility, etc. At least three major locations of disaster
planning can be observed in most communities. These are planning by
(1) specific community organizations, (2) clusters of community
organizations with similar interests and/or problems, and (3) differing
political jurisdictions.

1. Specific community organizations. A most frequent location
of disaster planning, of course, is within organizations which have
emergency responsibilities within their own organizational charter.
For example, hospitals with implicit responsibility for treatment
of casualties will develop their own "disaster" plan. (Such planning
may, of course, be encouraged by requirements for accreditation.)
Police departments may develop their own set of emergency operations.
Industries with large work forces may develop plans for "evacuation"
of employees and for plant maintenance during an emergency. This
type of planning is perhaps most frequent within a community simply
because it can be accomplished within the context of the ongoing
activity of the organization. Within this context, internal
resources can be allocated to planning. Participation in the
planning process can become one part of the responsibility of the
members of the organization and authority would fall within the
conventions of other types of organizational activity.

2. Clusters of community organizations. Since planning for
disaster involves so many facets of community life, it is not sur-
prising that organizations with like problems or those with similar
bases of community authority might become involved in joint planning.
Large communities, by their very size, are composed of many organi-
zations with identical functions serving different regions and
clientele. For example, a community may have six hospitals

differing in location, support structure and, to a certain extent,
in emphasis, but all of these hospitals might be involved in
casualty care. Because they anticipate a situation where resources
might be shared or transferred in an emergency, it is usual for
representatives of these separate but similar organizations to have a
common interest in the initiation of planning. In such a context,
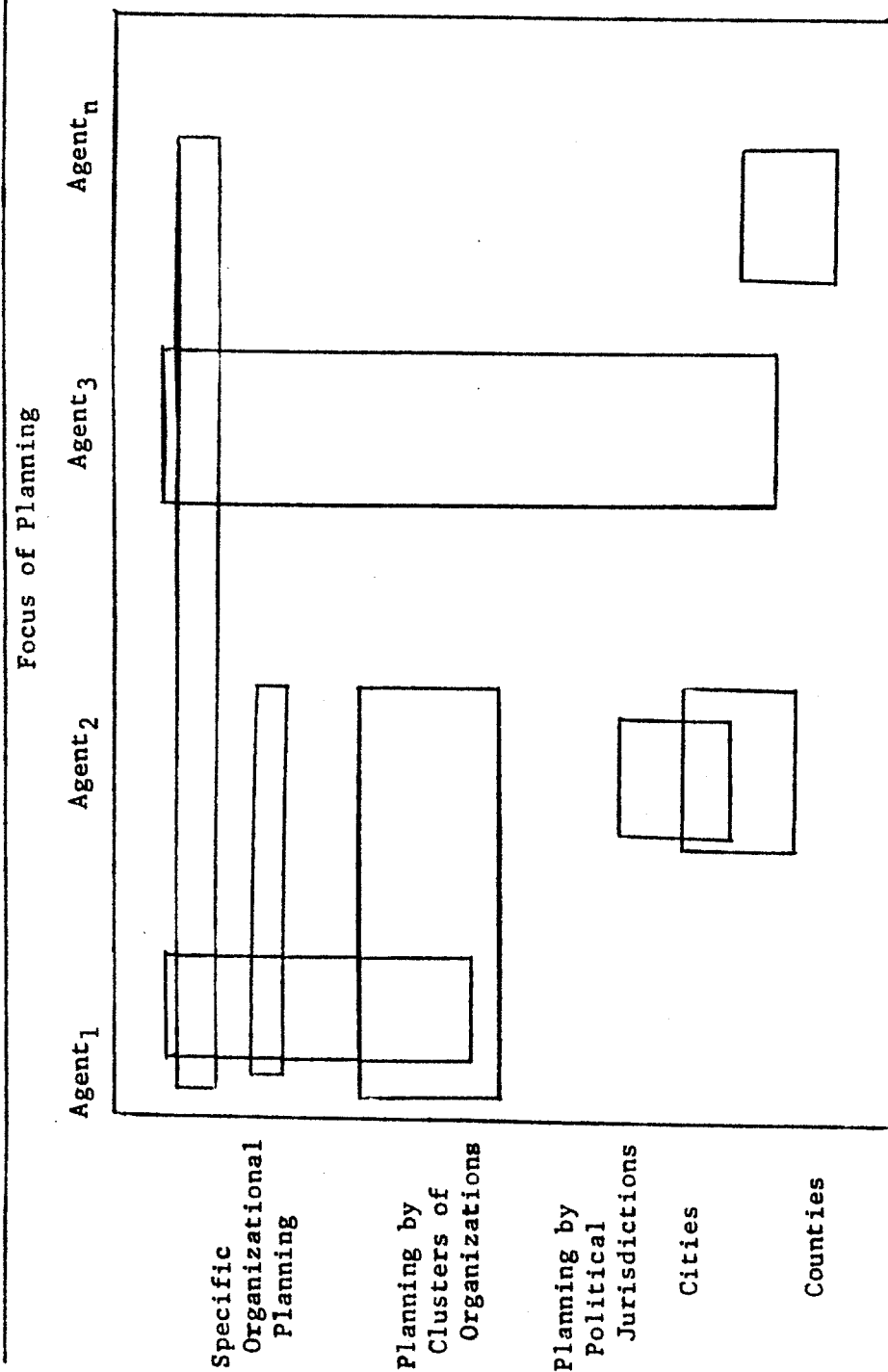an inter-hospital plan might be developed.

A similar type of "cluster" planning may involve several
different types of organizations, that is, organizations with different
functions who share a common basis of authority. For example,
municipal organizations--such as the police department, the fire
department, the public works department and other related city
agencies--may be involved together as a consequence of being a part
of a major municipal division such as the safety or service division.
In many ways, this locus of planning comes close to "city" planning
but it is more delimited in the scope of involvement.

3. Differing political jurisdictions. In American society,
the major locus for planning is at lower levels of governmental units.
These generally have been centered on administrative units based
on geographical considerations, such as counties, as well as units
based on geographical units with high population density, called
cities. On occasion, certain types of disaster planning have been
somewhat inclusive and have involved efforts of a variety of local
governmental and non-governmental organizations. In addition, in
situations where no urban areas predominate, the county is often the
logical administrative unit. Too, where urban areas are so pre-
dominant, city-county planning may be one and the same. There are
other situations, however, when city planning and county planning
may be competitive and overlapping. In certain communities, planning
for nuclear attack may have been on a county-wide basis while
planning for specific natural disaster agents may have been on a
city-wide basis.

In any case, the locus of disaster planning within a particular
community will reflect considerable variability. Some organizations
may be well advanced in their own planning on specific disaster
agents, while ignoring others. Some clusters of organizations will
have developed interorganizational networks for a specific set of
potential disaster problems. Some political jurisdictions may
have developed planning which has been inclusive of a variety of
governmental and non-governmental organizations. Other political
jurisdictions may have planning which overlaps. Some of these
planning efforts will have been recent while others will exist in
the memories of a few people and in the dead files of a larger
number of organizations. Some organizations will be preoccupied
with one type of planning and not interested in another. The results
of these differentials in the focus and locus of disaster planning
might be illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Patterns of Disaster Planning in the American Urban Community

Focus of Planning

Agent$_1$ Agent$_2$ Agent$_3$ Agent$_n$

Specific
Organizational
Planning

Planning by
Clusters of
Organizations

Planning by
Political
Jurisdictions

Cities

Counties

Disaster Tasks and Organizational Responsibility

Disaster agents create a series of problems in the community.
These problems, in turn, become the responsibility of organizations.
Organizational responsibility, however, is very complex since it has
several dimensions. The first dimension is simply the question as to
whether an organization recognizes a particular task as being a part
of its own emergency responsibility. In other words, does the organi-
zation accept certain responsibilities as a part of its organizational
charter? The second dimension is whether the rest of the organizations
that might be involved in the emergency social system define responsi-
bility in the same way as the organization that accepts the task. In
other words, do organizations in the emergency network have some sort
of consensus on how task responsibility within the community will be
allocated? A third dimension, perhaps only an extension of the
second, is that if the community has developed types of disaster
planning, how are organizational responsibilities defined in them?
It may be, of course, that there are several types of disaster plans
in effect and then the question becomes one of finding consistency
and agreement among the various plans in their allocations or organi-
zational responsibilities.

These dimensions of organizational responsibility by their very
complexity have the potentiality of contradiction and confusion. The
"ideal" situation, of course, would be one where a particular community
organization accepts certain responsibilities, and where the other
community organizations in the emergency network agree on the
location of that responsibility in the claiming organization and that
this location is acknowledged and defined in the overall disaster
planning which is existent within the community. While the preceding
would represent the "ideal" situation, it is obvious that there would
be many situations in actuality which would be less than ideal.
Some tasks may be "claimed" by several different organizations.
Each of these organizations would be considering the task as consti-
tuting their own major responsibility. Some tasks may be "claimed"
by no organization and, therefore, are considered no one's responsi-
bility. Other organizations within the emergency network may consider
certain tasks as not the appropriate domain of those organizations
which claim them. Other organizations may "give" responsibility to
organizations that do not accept it. Too, disaster plans may assign
responsibility to organizations which do not accept it.

Many of the possible complications are indicated in Figure 3
by using just one potential task -- search and rescue. This figure
shows eight different patterns which could exist in a community as
to which organization has responsibility for search and rescue.
This, of course, is an oversimplified version, but it conveys
the general idea of multiple possibilities.

In this study we tried to examine some of these dimensions. In
our interviewing, we attempted to ascertain what organizational
officials defined as the disaster responsibilities for their own

organizations. In addition, we asked each of our respondents for their perceptions of the organizations which had major responsibility for a series of tasks which could be anticipated in disaster events. This list included the following: pre-disaster overall community emergency planning, warning, stockpiling emergency supplies and equipment, search and rescue, evacuation, compiling lists of missing persons, care of the dead, maintenance of community order, housing victims, providing food and clothing to victims, establishing a pass system, overall coordination of disaster response, ambulance service, disaster simulation or drill as well as other functions. When aggregated, these responses provide an indication of the degree of consensus within a community as to where task responsibility is perceived to be located. In addition, in all of the communities studied, copies of disaster plans were obtained and subsequently examined to see whether their assignment of tasks was consistent among the various plans as well as the degree of consistency among the plans, the organizational consensus and the organizational self-definition.

The pattern varied in each of the communities studied. Each community had its own unique disaster planning history as well as a slightly different mosaic of community organizations. However, there were certain commonalities which would seem to indicate certain persistent problems. First, certain problematic aspects of the assignment and acceptance of disaster tasks will be discussed, then certain observations concerning the role of community organizations will be made, and finally certain comments will be made about the relationship of existing disaster planning to the actual perceptions of organizational responsibility.

Figure 3

Possible Patterns of Acceptance and Assignment of Search and Rescue Among Community Organizations

Acceptance of Responsibility by Organization	Definition of Responsibility by Other Organizations	Assignment by Disaster Plan(s)	
		Plan$_1$	Plan$_2$
Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Yes	Partial	Yes	
Yes	No	Yes	
Yes	No	No	
No	Yes	Yes	
No	No	Yes	
No	No	No	

Within the communities, there seemed to be considerable consensus on the responsibility of organizations to become involved in the range of operational disaster tasks. In part because of previous experience and the creation of mutual expectations, many of the disaster tasks were seen by particular organizations as constituting their responsibility in emergency situations. In addition, their claims were reinforced by other community organizations. Given this relatively high degree of consensus, it is useful to concentrate on the more problematic situations where there is less consensus.

1. There is less consensus on responsibility for pre-disaster planning and for community coordination. There are several reasons for greater lack of agreement here. Certainly, planning and coordination are more "abstract" than many of the operational tasks. In addition, they are tasks which are by their very nature "inter-organizational," that is, they cut across organizations and they involve multiple organizations. Therefore, they require more than the determination of committing the resources of one organization. By the very nature of the tasks, they involve the commitment of some resources of many different community organizations as well as the necessity to develop a "new"structure of authority within the community.

2. There is less consensus on tasks of great complexity, such as warning and evacuation. Disaster tasks may differ in their degree of complexity and therefore more complex tasks may necessitate the involvement of "parts" of several different organizations. For example, compiling a list of missing persons could be handled with a clerical staff of some organization supplemented by information sources from within the community. A task such as evacuation, however, will involve complex systems of communication, extensive transportation resources, the identification of alternative shelter locations as well as other resources necessary to move people. This task, by its very complexity, presents a relatively unclear picture to the various organizations. Many of the organizations know they will be involved but they are not certain how they will become involved and what other organizations they will be working with. Such tasks often are handled in actual emergency situations by the emergence of an ad hoc 'task group."

3. There is less consensus on tasks which have little continuity to pre-disaster experience. Certain tasks have greater continuity to pre-disaster experience than do others. For example, the fires which might be created by disaster impact are little different than the fires which fire departments cope with every day. On the other hand, there are certain tasks which do not have any pre-disaster parallel, such as the compilation of a list of missing persons. In addition, there are certain tasks which are anticipated to be so qualitatively different that pre-disaster ways of handling the tasks are seen as not being applicable. An example of this would be the care of the dead. In these situations where there is real or apparent discontinuity between pre-disaster experience and the anticipated actions necessary subsequent to a disaster event, there tends to be an unclear definition of organizational responsibility.

Organizational Responsibility

Within the communities there was considerable consensus on the organizational responsibilities of key operational groups. In most communities, such organizations as police departments, fire departments, public works departments, Red Cross, etc., tended to be seen as key organizations with definite organizational responsibility in disaster situations.

1. There was less consensus, however, on other organizations. Not all municipal agencies were seen to play important disaster roles. For example, the role of public health offices and of public welfare offices and even the roles of the city manager and mayor were not clearly defined. Too, while the role of the Red Cross was seen as being central, the role of the Salvation Army was unclear. In addition, the mass media was seldom seen as being an integral part of the warning system and seemingly representatives of the mass media were seldom involved in any disaster planning. In many communities where the focus of planning was on the municipal level, the role of county organizations, in particular, the sheriff's office, was quite vague.

2. There was less consensus on the role of medical organizations. Much of the planning within the communities tended to be bifurcated into "medical" and "non-medical" spheres of responsibility. While there might be a high degree of consensus of organizational responsibility within the medical area, this was generally not known in the non-medical sphere. In turn, the operational planning within the non-medical organizations was not clear to the medical areas. In general, medical planning was not well integrated into overall disaster planning within the community.

3. There was confusion as to the role of civil defense. In many task areas, there was the assumption that civil defense would somehow be involved, but respondents were not clear as to how it was involved. For example, many persons assumed that civil defense would be involved in pre-disaster planning but were not sure in what ways it was involved. It was clear that the respondents in the various emergency organizations did not visualize their own activity as a part of "civil defense" effort. They saw civil defense as a separate organizational entity Their view of civil defense was to treat it almost as an organization whose major function was to cope with "left-over" problems, that is, problems which were not the responsibility of any other organization. Therefore, if it was not clear that other organizations were involved in pre-disaster planning, then this must be a function of civil defense.

Disaster Plans

Within the communities, disaster plans were seldom an accurate reflection of the current expectations for organizational involvement and responsibility. The fact that disaster plans often were not an accurate reflection of present reality was due to the following factors:

1. Disaster plans make task assignments to organizations which are not aware of them.
2. Disaster plans often do not anticipate the involvement of certain organizations which claim certain emergency responsibilities as part of their everyday charter.

3. Multiple disaster plans oriented toward different disaster agents may specify quite divergent task assignments.

4. Disaster plans which are not updated may involve task assignments to organizational structures which no longer exist in the community.

5. Disaster plans, once written, are seldom used as a point of reference for current considerations in emergency planning.

Perhaps one illustration might cover most of the preceding points. In one community, during the 1960's, two different plans were developed. One focused on nuclear disasters and was the product of civil defense efforts and the other focused on a wide range of agents—natural disaster, wartime situations, widespread fires, and civil disturbances, etc. One of the plans focused on the city government while the other centered around the county government. In this community, when the perception of disaster responsibilities attributed to and accepted by community organizations was determined, it was checked against the assignment of these tasks in the two different disaster plans. In the "natural disaster plan," over 60 percent of the current expectations were not specified by the plan. In the civil defense disaster plan, over 90 percent of the current expectations were not specified by plan. In the civil defense disaster plan, over 90 percent of the current expectations were not specified. Looking for organizational assignments which were consistent in both plans and accepted by the current organizational network revealed there was only about two percent agreement and consistency.

The overall problems concerning the nature and form of disaster planning can perhaps best be illustrated with references drawn from our field notes on planning within another community.

Responsibility for pre-disaster planning was seen clearly as a responsibility of local civil defense. On specific tasks, however, there were elements of confusion. In reference to warning, the city disaster plan states that the local civil defense, the police department, the fire department and the sheriff's department all become involved. Local civil defense officials suggested that this is a responsibility shared by themslves, the police and fire departments, the public works department and make no mention of the sheriff's department.

The local plan designates local civil defense and the public health department as responsible for stockpiling of emergency supplies and equipment, but apparently the public health department is not aware of this.

While there are no discrepancies in the assignment of search and rescue efforts among police department, fire department and sheriff's department, there is one general discrepancy concerning evacuation. While these same three organizations are considered by local civil defense

personnel to be responsible and the organizations them-
selves accept this responsibility, evacuation is not even
mentioned in the city disaster plan.

The organizations designated by civil defense as being
responsible for compiling a list of missing persons are
the police and fire departments. This location is not
designated in the city plan nor are these two organizations
aware that this is their responsibility.

The local plan specifies that the police, fire and
sheriff's departments are to assist in the maintenance of
community order--beyond these three, local civil defense
officials and the mayor's office and the public works
department. Neither the fire nor the public works
department see their responsibilities in this area. On
the other hand, the sheriff's department sees this as a
major responsibility but is not mentioned by local civil
defense.

The city disaster plan makes no specific reference to
the involvement of the Red Cross except in an appendix
dealing with a cooperative agreement. There is no mention
of the involvement of the Salvation Army but there is an
informal agreement between the Red Cross and the Salvation
Army for cooperative effort in housing and providing food
and clothing.

The division of labor on the establishment of a pass
system involves some discrepancies. Local civil defense
sees itself as coordinator of such a system, while the local
plan gives this responsibility to the police department.
The sheriff's office also claims a major responsibility in
this area.

Overall coordination of the local effort seems to be
clearly understood by all of the community organizations as
the responsibility of the mayor's office and the local civil
defense agency. The local plan, however, delegates major
medical responsibility to a medical coordinating group
which seems to be nonexistent. On the other hand, no mention
is made of the local medical society which at the time of
the interviewing seems to have been the closest approximation
to a medical coordinating entity.

Most organizations within the community were aware of
their task responsibilities assigned to them by the city
plan or attributed to them by the local civil defense office.
The major sources of discrepancy appears to come from the
failure to acknowledge the roles anticipated by the sheriff's
office and the local medical society. While these organi-
zations were mentioned frequently by others, local civil
defense respondents did not mention them. The sheriff, in
turn, claimed to run the entire disaster operation with

little assistance from anyone else. In addition, many
of the respondents, when asked about the responsibility
for organizational tasks, answered, "I guess we do that."
Almost never did a respondent consult a planning document
to check organizational responsibility but answered from
his/her own experience, knowledge or guess.

The matters discussed here do not exhaust all that could be
said about the nature and scope of local disaster planning in
American communities. However, major aspects have been considered.
As such, this discussion should be useful both for disaster researchers
and operational planners.