



DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND DISASTERS

1. There are a small number of studies, supplemented by anecdotal evidence, that indicate increases in domestic violence and sexual assault following disasters.

- A 45% increase in domestic violence reports to police occurred, following the Mount St. Helen's volcanic eruption in 1980.
- Following a 1989 earthquake in California, one shelter reported a 50% increase in request for restraining orders. Sexual assault was reported to have risen 300% according to a United Way study.
- Florida's Hurricane Andrew in 1992, was followed by a 50% increase in spousal abuse calls. In 2004, the state was hit by 4 hurricanes and 6 months later increases in calls and shelters were reported by dv agencies.
- The average state turn away rate at domestic violence shelters rose 111% over the preceding year, following the floods that occurred in Missouri in 1993.
- Following flooding in Grand Forks, North Dakota, requests for temporary protection orders rose by 18%, and counseling by 59% over the previous year (July 1996- July 1997). Calls were up 21%.
- One article written by Catholic Charities provides a figure of a 45% increase in domestic violence following Katrina.
- One post-Katrina study of residents in trailer parks in Mississippi, found that gender based violence had been at 4.6 per 100,000 persons prior to Katrina (occurred in August 2005). In 2006, the rate had increased to 16.3 per 100,000. By 2007, it had dropped to 10.1 per 100,000 – still more than double the baseline.
- One survey reported 9 of 13 domestic violence programs reporting increases in DV after major storms or disasters.
- An earthquake in Australia was reported to be followed by a 50% rise in DV reports.
- An oil spill in Alaska was followed by reported increases in DV and child abuse.

2. A quick literature review indicates the following should be kept in mind when considering the impact of Sandy on NJ:

- While there is minimal conclusive evidence due to data collection issues, there is a general consensus that domestic violence increases following a disaster and that the increase can be substantial. Generally speaking, the increase can be estimated at up to 50%.
- This holds true for events in the US, as well as fires, flooding, tsunamis, earthquakes and other disasters that have occurred around the world over the last 20-30 years.
- Disasters differ in duration and scope. Some, such as Katrina, may result deaths of a significant number of individuals that cause both grief and loss of support to family members, as well as traumatic experiences for first responders. Violence of different levels, including murder and sexual assault may occur – both during the disaster and afterwards.

- The recovery from a disaster may be mitigated by the strength of the infrastructure (including all public and social services) prior to the disaster as well as their continued functioning afterwards.
- The impact is generally reported as being seen for up to 2 years following the disaster. It is not clear if this is when things improve, or just when tracking seems to end.
- It should be noted – especially so it doesn't act as a red herring – that at the same time DV is increasing, there can be a decrease in overall crime rates in the disaster area following a population displacement.

3. Certain geographic areas and populations are more at risk for an increase in stress factors, including DV, following a disaster:

- higher in urban areas
- those who are economically distressed
- women more than men, including those who are elderly
- immigrant populations
- single parents and the disabled
- may impact first responders as well as those who were victims

4. Housing seems to be a key factor promoting DV following a disaster because it

- Increases stress
- People may return to an abusive partner or the same family where he/she experienced abuse previously.
- May share accommodations with family members or acquaintances and be exposed to violence (sexual or domestic)
- May aggravate strained child custody situations
- People have fewer housing options to leave a dv situation
- The abuser may use the crisis as a way to reform a relationship or fall back to the “old” behavior patterns
- May decrease affordable housing option due to “land grabs” and post-disaster upscale development which then impacts women and their children, as well as businesses who employ them
- A male partner is identified as head of the household, and relief funds and services are geared to him, leaving a female partner dependent upon him

5. On the other hand, a disaster may sometimes provide an opportunity

- For the victim to access funds or services to help him/her establish a new household or make other positive changes
- The victim gains strength in having survived a disaster and builds on that to make changes in his/her life
- The victim's loss of personal property may result in less of an “investment” in maintaining a personal relationship

6. Changes in DV reporting may also be linked to

- Increases in DV reporting may be linked to closer living arrangements providing more opportunities for 3rd parties to observe and report DV
- On the other hand, there is the thought that DV requires some level of privacy, and so while violence may not increase in tight quarters, shouting, slamming, and leaving the residence may all escalate when living in close quarters
- An increase in reporting may come about because of more visibility and involvement with social services or other avenues of help
- Decrease in reporting or responding may be tied to the police or others “overlooking” or “excusing” domestic violence in light of the stress of the disaster or other response priorities – this includes when the perpetrator was a first responder

7. The dynamics that occur post-disaster that relate to domestic violence include

- Loss of support systems when displaced
- Victims experience trauma or re-traumatization or re-victimization
- The above may make them more susceptible to perpetrators who may increase their behaviors, including sexual violence and trafficking, as well unscrupulous employment practices
- Increase in housing costs
- Decreases in wages
- Reduced mobility, including the lack of transportation to jobs do to cars being ruined
- Child care resources being lost (in New Orleans, 2/3s of child care remained lost 2 years post Katrina)

8. There seem to be at least two schools of thoughts as to why domestic violence increases after disasters:

- Violence is inflicted by the perpetrator to gain a sense of control in a situation that seems out of control
- The strain of the disaster creates family violence that develops when there is increases drug use, poor coping skills, sleep disturbances, increased depression, re-surfacing of PTSD, etc.

9. With regards to both sexual assault and child abuse, it is recommended that efforts be made to track and act on the displacement of sexual offenders following as a disaster.



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