QUICK RESPONSE REPORT

Disaster Realities in the Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina: Revisiting the Looting Myth

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This report presents preliminary findings derived from quick response fieldwork conducted by a team of Disaster Research Center (DRC) researchers who traveled through sections of Louisiana and Mississippi from September 20 through September 30, 2005. Funding for this trip was provided by a grant from the Natural Hazards Center at the University of Colorado at Boulder and internal DRC funds. Issues regarding instances of looting or appropriating behavior that occurred in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina are discussed.

Introduction

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina made landfall in the Gulf Coast area as a category 3 hurricane on the Saffir-Simpson Hurricane Scale. The major impacts from the storm included human, structural, and economic losses, making it one of the most devastating disasters in U.S. history. In the wake of this event, the Disaster Research Center (DRC) sent a team of eight researchers to the Gulf Coast to collect perishable data from responders and victims. During this quick response fieldwork, information was obtained using direct observation, interviews (captured by electronic recording and/or note taking), still photography, and digital video. In addition, perishable documents, such as briefings, reports, memos, maps, and command charts were collected whenever possible.

This report uses data collected by a team of three DRC researchers that focused its research effort in Louisiana. In total, using purposive and snowball sampling, 64 interviews were conducted with both individuals and organizational actors. Individuals interviewed included occupants at a mass care shelter in Baton Rouge, occupants of a Holiday Inn Express hotel being used to house evacuees, citizens of Louisiana communities, and emergent responders, such as volunteers and citizens, who had either been affected by or were responding to the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. Organizational actors included private sector/nongovernmental responders, such as the American Red Cross, and responders at the local, state, and federal levels.

Looting

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, a number of media reports that made extensive references to reports of looting emerged from New Orleans and the surrounding heavily impacted areas. Yet, long-standing assertions in sociological literature on disasters portray widespread looting as a myth (Fischer 1998 and 1988; Quarantelli 1994; Siman-Zakhari 1989; Gray and Wilson 1984; Goltz 1984). Given this discrepancy, interviews were conducted with individuals and organizational actors about the reports of looting that came out of the area.

The purpose of these semistructured interviews was to examine the extent to which looting actually occurred in the aftermath of the hurricane. In instances where looting was reported, information was obtained to differentiate between individuals taking nonessential items and those engaging in appropriating behavior (i.e., taking items necessary for survival). Also, for cases in which looting actually did occur, questions were asked regarding motivations for this behavior.

Appropriating Behavior Versus Looting

Gray and Wilson (1984, 2) define looting as "both grand and petty larceny of personal property during and after disaster impact." Appropriating behavior involves a person taking property owned by another to use it for emergency purposes and, depending upon the item, with the intent of returning it at a later date. There were many reports of both looting and appropriating behavior occurring following the storm.

An Amtrak police officer—who was stationed at the Union Passenger Terminal in downtown New Orleans, which had been converted into a temporary jail for looters—commented that looting occurred mainly during the first week after the storm. According to this officer, the majority of the looting involved the taking of need-based items rather than luxury items. He estimated that 75 percent of the cases involved individuals taking items necessary to stay alive, and the remaining 25 percent involved individuals taking items that were not essential for survival. Of the 25 percent who took luxury items, he speculated that the majority of them were already criminals, and it was the lack of law enforcement that brought about the looting.

However, in another interview, an evacuee said that it was her belief that 80 percent of the looters took luxury items and 20 percent were involved in appropriating behavior. In both New Orleans and Slidell, officials interviewed spoke of arrests made for the looting of nonessential items. These officials made references to cases of appropriating behavior but did not mention that arrests were made in these cases.

A major finding that emerged from this research was that there is no clear definition that is accepted by the general public or agents of social control of what separates looting from appropriating behavior. The issue of what differentiates appropriating behavior from looting is debatable and depends primarily on an individual's perception of the situation (Barsky 2006). Therefore, what one officer could have viewed as looting, resulting in an arrest, could have been seen as appropriating behavior by another. Citizens, too, could have formed different opinions on the extent to which items constituted necessary versus nonessential items. In order to accurately document looting in the aftermath of disasters, a clear distinction needs to be made between looting and appropriating behavior.

The Media's Portrayal of Looting

Although many studies indicate that widespread looting rarely occurs during a disaster, the media frequently reports on looting during these events. Eisenberg (2003) says that because media reports are often misleading, the media can be a major source of inaccuracy when reporting on disaster behavior.[1] According to Quarantelli (1991, 2), "a strong case can be made that what average citizens and officials expect about disasters, what they come to know of ongoing disasters, and what they learn from disasters that have occurred, are primarily although not exclusively learned from mass media accounts."

The impact that media reports on looting had on operations and citizen responses was observed in interviews with evacuees and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) officials in the aftermath of Katrina. For example, one evacuee at a mass care shelter in Baton Rouge stated that police had to force him to evacuate from his apartment after the flooding. He did not willingly leave his home because of the reports of looting on the news. This reinforces the literature on looting that asserts that individuals' fear of property being stolen factors into their evacuation decision making during a disaster event (Fischer 1998).

In another instance, a FEMA official provided an example of what the agency actually did to guard the medical supplies that conflicted with the media's portrayal of the situation. This official spoke about a situation in which members of FEMA were asked by owners of a New Orleans pharmacy to take care of the medical items belonging to that pharmacy. According to this official, the way the media portrayed the situation made it appear as if members of FEMA were breaking into the pharmacy and looting items.

A report made in *USA Today* stated that, in regard to looting, "after the hurricane, the city just let loose." This statement contradicts reports made by a number of individuals interviewed that many people behaved positively in the aftermath of the hurricane. In their reporting on post-Katrina related looting, the media did not provide accurate information. There were cases in which the media reports conflicted with more detailed findings made by our on-site research team.

Actual Reports of Looting

An overall theme that emerged when speaking to organizational actors was that there were more reports of looting in downtown New Orleans than in

areas outside of the city. According to a New Orleans law enforcement official, instances of looting were low in the first week after Hurricane Katrina and during Hurricane Rita but spiked when the city was reopened to citizens. At the time of the interview—following Hurricane Rita—the official stated that instances of looting were increasing once again.

Statistics obtained from the official stationed at the temporary jail for looters in downtown New Orleans showed that as of September 28, the day the interview was conducted, 237 reports of arrests had been made at the facility since it was established. When we contrast these numbers with reports from Slidell police officials that only five or six people were arrested for breaking into stores and taking luxury items, we see a major difference in the two communities. This particular law enforcement official mentioned that it was primarily businesses rather than homes had been looted, and that "everything in these stores was taken except for the country western CDs."

Citywide crime statistics from the New Orleans Police Department Technical Services Bureau Information Systems and Services Division reported that there were a total of 17,782 instances of theft and burglary in 2004; that averages out to 48.7 burglaries or thefts per day. These statistics actually suggest a decrease in arrests for looting or similar offences following Hurricane Katrina relative to a nondisaster time period. Researchers (Quarantelli 1994; Gray and Wilson 1984) state that during a disaster, standard crime as a whole drops below the everyday reported rates (in terms of police reports and arrests made). The incidence of postdisaster crime, particularly looting, is much less than what is believed by residents and the media (Birkland 1998).

However, with respect to crime statistics, there are limitations. One such limitation is that disasters may negatively impact the record keeping system. This must be taken into account when viewing the crime statistics for the time period immediately following a disaster (Barsky 2006). And, the lack of a uniform distinction between looting and appropriating behavior allows police officers to use discretion when deciding who to arrest. There are instances where some police officers would turn a blind eye to the looting, while others would make an arrest. Thus, this use of discretion leads to inconsistencies in the official crime statistics.

Research has found that police also use discretion when making arrests during routine periods. For example, according to Skolnick (1975, 74), "it is impossible to eliminate discretion entirely from the administration of criminal law, even for such a simple and routine operation as the enforcement of parking meter violations." The same finding may hold true in the immediate postdisaster environment, where police use discretion regarding who they arrest for looting and who they believe are engaging in appropriating behavior.

Explanations of Looting

In situations where looting arrests were made, looting may have been the result of criminals taking advantage of the opportunities presented by the hurricane, such as a lack of law enforcement, to further their own interests. Many evacuees were under the impression that the looting that did occur was just a manifestation of what already occurs in society, and that those who did loot were those individuals who would partake in antisocial behavior hurricane or no hurricane. This view was shared by a number of officials in both New Orleans and Slidell along with many evacuees. A sergeant in the Slidell police force expressed this view when he stated that he recognized some of the looters as individuals with prior arrest records.

In other instances, looting may have been the result of behavior stemming from social inequality. According to the 2000 Census, 27.9 percent of New Orleans residents were living below the poverty line in 1999 compared to 12.4 percent of the total U.S. population. In fact, 21 percent of the New Orleans population reportedly made less than $10,000 per year in 1999 (Census 2000).

In areas where social strife resulting from inequality is an issue impacting everyday life, "natural disasters sometimes seem to offer once-in-a-lifetime opportunities for attacking the party in power while it is distracted" (Stallings 1988, 571). In these types of circumstances, such as in St. Croix after Hurricane Hugo (Quarantelli 1994), the looting patterns seen in civil disturbances are generated by disasters. A New Orleans law enforcement official emphasized this point when he stated that instances of civil unrest were beginning to occur in New Orleans in the days following Hurricane Katrina: "You could see civil unrest taking place before our eyes, especially around the Superdome."

Examples of looting and civil unrest in the area were attributed to the lack of essential needs. For example, the New Orleans law enforcement official mentioned above recounted situations in which citizens took water trucks from the local water plant and drove them around to give out water. They

felt that their basic need of access to clean drinking water was not being met. So, they took matters into their own hands.

Prosocial Behavior

Goltz (1984) argues that the more rational and altruistic responses to human disasters are largely ignored by news stories. Instead, social breakdown behaviors and institutional efforts to control these behaviors are emphasized (Goltz 1984). In contrast to issues involving looting and antisocial behavior, many citizens and organizational actors made reference to cases of prosocial and helping behavior.

One evacuee residing in a Holiday Inn Express hotel gave a personal example of prosocial behavior: "Everybody's been nice and very helpful . . . we're not going hungry. We have never gone hungry since we set foot in this place." A New Orleans law enforcement official also referenced prosocial behavior by commenting that "most people by and large really, really, really just helped one another and they didn't ask for anything back." It was the belief of many individuals interviewed that in the aftermath of Katrina, the majority of citizens behaved positively and went out of their way to help one another.

As another indication of the complexity of looting, we found evidence to support the suggestion that, in contrast to the antisocial stereotype of looting and the hoarding of scarce commodities, many of those who admitted to or knew someone who had taken things indicated that these goods were shared to help others survive. This observation suggests a possible prosocial element in appropriating behavior, as has been suggested by others researching this event (Barnshaw 2005).

Steps to Prevent Looting

When looting is viewed by society as a social problem, the claim of looting can serve as a function for systems of control during and after disaster periods. An organization may use this collective definition of looting as a way to shape its actions both during and after a disaster. For example, if looting is seen as a social problem, organizations such as law enforcement agencies may make the case that more security needs to be added in times of disasters to prevent looting. A sergeant from the Slidell police force stated that to prevent further looting in the aftermath of Katrina, the Slidell police constantly patrolled the area, "giving off a vibe of intimidation and the impression that looting [would] not be tolerated." Although police officials reported that only

five or six looting arrests had been made in Slidell, members of the police force were taking steps to deter looting. Because looting was a concern in Slidell, members of the police force adjusted their roles to respond to what they viewed as a social problem.

Conclusions and Implications for Future Research

A number of media reports on looting in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina conflicted with long-standing assertions in sociological literature on disasters portraying widespread looting as a myth (Fischer 1998 and 1988; Quarantelli 1994; Siman-Zakhari 1989; Gray and Wilson 1984; Goltz 1984). Given this, semistructured interviews were conducted with 64 individuals and organizational actors to examine the extent to which looting actually occurred. Findings emerging from this research show that there is no clear definition of what separates looting from appropriating behavior, particularly in the minds of responders. Because the criteria for what constitutes looting compared to appropriating behavior is debatable, what could be considered to be looting by one individual could very well be appropriating behavior to another. This lack of a distinction between the two terms not only influences an individual's perception of the situation but also plays a role in how accurately looting is documented in the aftermath of disasters.

Other factors, such as the use of discretion by police and the actual impact of the disaster itself, also have statistical record keeping in the aftermath of disasters. Statistics obtained on looting showed that as of September 28, 237 reports of arrests had been made in an improvised New Orleans facility since it was established in the wake of the storm. When compared to crimes during a nondisaster time period, findings actually show a decrease in arrests in the postdisaster time period.

In situations where looting arrests were made, the impression of many of the interviewees was that looting may have been the result of criminals taking advantage of the opportunities presented by the hurricane, such as a lack of law enforcement, to further their own interests rather than a breakdown of normal social order. Other explanations for looting, such as looting as a result of behavior stemming from social inequality, were also provided.

Regarding the media's reporting of looting, findings suggest that reports made by the media had an impact on operations and citizen responses. Likewise, findings imply that the media was not

always accurate in reports of looting made in the postdisaster time period.

Along with reports on looting, many citizens made reference to prosocial behavior that occurred in the aftermath of the disaster. It was the belief of many of those interviewed that the majority of citizens behaved positively and went out of their way to help one another. In regard to law enforcement officials, preliminary findings revealed instances in which an organization used the collective definition of looting to shape its actions.

This report has provided a limited view of issues related to looting in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Further research is needed to determine socially agreed upon definitions for appropriating behavior and looting. In cases in which looting is reported as occurring, research needs to be conducted on who was arrested and the details related to their cases. Did the person arrested have a prior record for criminal activity? What goods were taken and what was the reason presented for taking the good or for being arrested? Was it an individual or a group that was responsible for the looting incident? Are the individuals accused of looting from the impacted community or are they outsiders? A qualitative approach to understanding the process of looting that does occur is key to understanding the phenomenon and distinguishing between looting and appropriating behavior. Additional research is also needed to better understand both who partakes in looting and who is impacted.

Notes

[1] See Dynes, Russell R., and Havidán Rodríguez. 2005. Finding and framing Katrina: The social construction of disaster. In *Understanding Katrina: Perspectives from the Social Sciences*. Social Science Research Council Web site. http://understandingkatrina.ssrc.org/Dynes_Rodriguez/.

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