

## **The Role of Grassroots Organizations and Volunteers in Southeast Texas after Hurricane Ike**

Robert Owen Gardner  
Assistant Professor of Sociology  
Department of Sociology and Anthropology,  
Program in Environmental Studies  
Linfield College  
900 SE Baker St  
McMinnville, OR 97219  
[rgardne@linfield.edu](mailto:rgardne@linfield.edu)

\*Note: First names have been changed to preserve the anonymity of respondents.

### **Introduction and Background**

On the morning of Sept 13, 2008, Hurricane Ike made landfall along the Texas Gulf Coast near Galveston Island. The eye of the storm targeted the coastal community of Baytown as a Category 2 storm with sustained winds of 110 mph (Baltimore and Driver, 2008). Sweeping through Haiti and Cuba before hitting the US Gulf Coast, this massive storm was one of the largest and most destructive Atlantic Hurricanes on record. Residents living in low lying areas and areas in direct path of the storm surge were warned with Ycertain deathΦ if they did not evacuate. Despite these dire warnings, it was reported that nearly a quarter of the residents of Galveston, TX stayed behind, leaving thousands in the path of destruction (YHurricane IkeΦ, 2008).

The storm surge and winds most directly affected the communities closest to the Gulf of Mexico. However widespread damage was reported throughout the Greater Houston area with wind impacts being felt as far north as Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania and parts of southern Canada. Though Houston dodged a direct hit from Ike, gale force winds toppled trees, knocked out power to over 4 million residents, and shattered glass throughout the metropolitan region (Baltimore and Driver, 2008). Because of heavy damage to the power grid outlying areas closer to the Gulf Coast experienced widespread power outages (Baltimore, 2008). Heavy rains and storm surge caused hundreds of miles of coastal flooding through Texas and Louisiana (Baltimore, 2008). Though many residents living further inland made it out of the storm with minimal structural damage, the commercial infrastructure that would have normally supplied food, water, ice and other staples was without power for weeks leaving entire communities without necessary resources.

Ike also made landfall on the heels of Hurricane Gustav, which arrived in Western Louisiana a few weeks prior. Ike's storm surge and vast bands of rain flooded many low-lying and coastal areas that were flooded previously by Gustav. As a result, these communities were ill equipped to handle more wind or water. The Ydouble whammyΦ of storms (as one resident described it), presented challenges to immediate relief. Existing

supplies were stretched thin, and volunteers were still delivering relief to communities affected by Gustav, delaying their response time and limiting the effectiveness of their work. Across the region, grassroots relief organizations and community volunteers sprung to action to address the gap in relief. In this study, I examine the role of grassroots volunteers and organizations in the delivery of direct disaster relief through an ethnographic report of volunteer groups responding to Hurricane Ike in Southeast Texas.

### **Objectives:**

Immediately after a disaster strikes, first responders converge on the affected area in the form of search and rescue teams, paramedics, police, emergency medical teams, and other government sponsored activities. In the hours and days that follow, well-established non-profit organizations begin mobilizing their resources and volunteer teams with expertise in critical response situations. Once residents have assessed the damage to their properties and stabilized their own situation, local citizen groups, churches, volunteer networks, and other response groups coalesce to provide forms of aid to affected residents. When media outlets begin reporting the extent and severity and begin to narrate the human dramas of the disaster, volunteers from outside the region are often close behind.

In many disaster situations, a significant gulf exists between the distribution of resources and the immediate needs of affected individuals. In certain areas, it may be days or even weeks before necessary supplies and services arrive. Once they do arrive, teams of volunteers are needed to deliver relief and respond to the emergent needs of the community. Volunteer organizations, churches and community groups as well as individuals, families, and other spontaneous volunteers often mobilize to fill this gap (Drabek, 1986; Lowe 2002). These groups frequently provide relief that is supplemental to professional disaster response teams. In the absence of coordinated relief, citizen response groups often emerge to provide their own forms of assistance (Tierney, et al., 2001). Due to their emergent quality, these groups are often able to respond more directly and agilely to the specific needs of their community, especially when they are going unmet.

According to Tierney et al. (2001), "despite its importance, volunteer behavior has not been studied extensively in the disaster research field. We know relatively little about spontaneous volunteers and even less about the other patterns of volunteer behavior" (quoted in Lowe 2002). These spontaneous volunteer groups often consist of private citizens who work together in pursuit of collective goals relevant to actual or potential disasters but whose organization has not yet become institutionalized. These groups lack practically all formal elements of organization (Stallings and Quarantelli, 1985) making them difficult to track and study. Due to their loosely organized volunteer base, and ephemeral and transitory nature, little is known about these emergent behaviors as disaster research has provided little insight into their internal dynamics (Drabek, 1986; Majchrzak, et. al., 2007). Because of their central role of filling the gaps of traditional relief models, the dynamics of these groups necessitate our attention. This project aims to better understand the processes, dynamics, and experiences of disaster relief

volunteerism in the immediate post-impact time frame. It examines the role that grassroots volunteers and organizations play in disaster relief. In particular, I examine how existing social networks-- including both strong and weak social ties (Grannovetter, 1973) and related forms of social capital (Putnam, 2000) facilitate and mobilize spontaneous disaster volunteers.

## **Methods**

Using ethnographic field methods and interviewing, I conducted five days of intensive observation examining various grassroots organizations that were mobilized to deliver relief aid to victim of Hurricane Ike. I was a participant observer and volunteered alongside other relief workers in various capacities: distributing ice and water, preparing and cooking food, assembling tents and canopies, distributing information packets, unloading supplies, and directing residents to appropriate places to receive relief. As an active member (Adler and Adler, 1987) in disaster relief work, I assumed the role of a researcher-volunteer (Allahyari, 2000), which allowed me to quickly build rapport and trust with my research subjects. This functional role provided me with direct access to relief centers, relief volunteers, and the strategies they employed in delivering aid. In total, I volunteered with and observed nine different relief sites during my fieldwork serving alongside hundreds of grassroots volunteers representing dozens of community organizations.

Before leaving for the Gulf Coast and shortly after my arrival, I scoured the Internet using the Google.com search engine for postings pertaining to volunteer relief opportunities for Hurricanes Gustav and Ike. My initial search directed me to well-established organizations like The Red Cross and Salvation Army that were requesting the assistance of experienced volunteers only. Those lacking relevant experience were often encouraged to donate money or blood from their home community. A few hits further into my search, I discovered links to Facebook groups devoted to Hurricane Ike volunteerism, grass roots activist blogs and independent media sites who were describing relief opportunities with organizations like Hands on Central Texas and American Rainbow Rapid Relief (ARRR). Other sites linked to faith-based relief organizations like Operation Blessing or Southern Baptist Disaster Relief who were setting up relief centers around their mobile kitchens and calling citizen volunteers to aid in the relief effort. It was from this initial list that I began contacting organizations for volunteer opportunities during my first hours in Houston.

I learned early in my research that having few existing ties (weak or strong), connections or contacts with local grassroots organizational networks prior to arriving in Houston made it difficult to gain immediate entrée. Therefore, it took some time to fully understand the role that grassroots volunteer groups were playing in the relief work. Initially, I collected a convenience sample of rank and file volunteers with whom I came into contact when I visited and volunteered with the relief center staff. From this initial sample, I utilized a snowball sampling technique to identify subjects through chain referrals that included group leaders and community organizers. At each of the sites, I also secured interviews with the site leaders or lead volunteer coordinators.

As I spent more time volunteering in the affected areas and interviewing volunteer staff, my repertoire of contacts grew larger. As I accumulated more social capital, I was able to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the interrelationships of grassroots relief groups and their relationship to the larger federal and state response infrastructure. Membership in these organizations is often loose and transitory, but having accessible points of entry into their networks are necessary to understand their dynamics. This methodological note highlights the central claim of this research: Social capital influences a citizen's opportunity to volunteer. While some organizations rely on loose ties to fulfill their volunteer roles, others have more stringent requirements for membership. Despite their level of prior involvement with the relief organization, one's connections with grassroots organizational networks facilitate opportunities to aid in disaster relief. It is to these concerns I now turn my attention.

### **Houston PODS: Tapping into Local Volunteer Networks**

Throughout Greater Houston, PODS (points of distribution) were temporary relief centers set up by FEMA and facilitated by a hodgepodge of federal, state, and local officials. These sites were designed to deliver basic supplies such as food, water, and ice and distribute information about disaster services to local residents. Though federal and state disaster officials handled the logistics, rank and file volunteers were members of the local community. Volunteers assisted with unloading pallets of ice and water from semi trucks, packing these items into the trunks of the steady line of cars, or carrying the heavy bags for elderly residents or those carrying children to their parked cars a few blocks away in adjacent neighborhoods.

With no paperwork or formal check in procedures (other than filling out a name tag reading YvolunteerΦ), any person could walk up to assist. Though there was one large group of high school students who were mobilized by their community service coordinator, the remaining YunaffiliatedΦ volunteers were there as families or individuals. Despite their lack of group affiliation, most were no strangers to service. Gabriel, an African American man in his late 40s and father to two teenage volunteers explained that he made it out of the storm without significant damage and wanted to give his children an opportunity to serve in a time of need. He explained that he had Ysignificant experienceΦ serving the local homeless and often took his children to a downtown soup kitchen to Yhelp build their awareness of need in our community.Φ This sentiment was not unique in that most of the unaffiliated volunteers expressed some prior experience serving the larger community.

A second POD centered at the University of Houston was strikingly larger the size and scope. Upon entering, I noticed a vast army of volunteer groups throughout the relief site, each of who were dressed in similarly colored shirts. They were college students from the University of Houston and neighboring Texas Southern University that were volunteering with their respective campus groups: ROTC, Campus Crusade for Christ, Pre-optometry professional Students (POPS), UH Alumni Association, Residence Life staff, and members of the Texas Southern Marching Band among various others.

Relief center organizers engaged in direct communication through the existing organizational networks in the affected local communities. When they arrived on the scene, organizers tapped into the social networks of churches, high schools, universities and community colleges, service groups, local and county government, and other organizations. Organizers explained that they needed to canvass the local area and identify key players in the community to mobilize needed resources and volunteer personnel. Community leaders such as church pastors, athletic coaches, teachers, etc. were asked to contact their constituency directly or mobilize call lists or call chains to identify potential volunteers. In the absence of local contacts, federal and state employees are often left waiting for logistical roadblocks to be removed by a bureaucratic maze of officials. John, a POD site director from USACE explained his initial frustrations with FEMA and the state and federal bureaucracy that he saw as slowing down the relief operation.

Once the POD location was announced, we immediately had a line of traffic: six hundred cars waiting here for four hours. I couldn't get product. I had to go through city government, county government, even down to district judges to get the supplies we needed. When I called repeatedly to check on the status of our order, I got the same reply, repeatedly: 'we are evaluating your work order, we'll get back with you.' After getting the same answer, I got fed up and found the cell phone number for the Judge from a local community leader and called him directly. He said 'we are in the process of evaluating your work order.' I replied to him 'well, sir. I hope this evaluation process is a quick one, because we have 600 cars here waiting in the hot sun. We don't want any problems here. Remember, this is an election year' Next thing I know, about 20 minutes later, here come the trucks.

John explained that local connections to grassroots organizations and churches were vital to delivering relief as effectively and as fully as possible. When he first arrived on site it was just me and a few county staff members. Next thing I know, we have droves of people out here helping out and serving 20,000 (residents) per day. When I asked John how he was able to mobilize the impressive number of volunteers to the site, he admitted that local community organizers who were doing the bulk of the volunteer mobilization. It was really the work of people on the ground, like Tamara over there-- the woman with the bullhorn-- who got a hold of all of her contacts. I don't know a soul here, so it really is all the local folks with connections to local organizations who are bringing in all of the volunteers.

Relief organizers also utilized indirect forms of communication through social networking technologies. For example, organizers reported posting calls for volunteers on Internet blogs, social networking websites like Facebook, Myspace, or Tribe.net, community bulletin boards like Craigslist.org, or mobile chat or text messaging communities like Twitter. Information about necessary goods, services, or personnel was sent word-of-mouth through these grapevines of communication. To mobilize volunteers, a community service group leader for the UH campus sent out a mass e-mail to students,

faculty, staff, and other campus groups. He explained that before his tenure as service coordinator there was no culture of volunteerism on campus. It wasn't until students formed a comprehensive service group on campus that people started to work in the community in any kind of organized fashion. The bigwigs at the college-- the deans, the provost-- contacted me (after Ike) and said 'hey, you are tapped in. We are putting you in charge of organizing the volunteer response.' So I sent an e-mail out to my group, and then sent a campus wide e-mail to students.

While some students read, received and forwarded the message to their friends and group mates, widespread power outages prevented potential volunteers from charging their laptops or checking their e-mail. However, recent advances in communication technology allowed individuals to use their cellular phones and phone networks to transmit e-mail messages and access Internet websites. Student volunteers explained to me that they posted the call for volunteers to various social networking sites, micro blogs, and text-messaging services to publicize the volunteer efforts.

To further spread the call, Deandre, a member of the Texas Southern Marching Band explained that he received a text message from his band director. He explained that the band director had received word from a colleague that student volunteers needed to be mobilized, so he texted the entire band. Deandre felt he needed to do something and the opportunity arrived on his cell phone. Since we wasn't in school 'cause of the storm, none of us had nothin' to do. We was just sittin' around. So we came out here. To help out. Similarly, Justin, a 25-year-old parishioner of a local Baptist church found out about the opportunity to volunteer through his church administration. Even though there was no power or electricity, his pastor text messaged members of the congregation about volunteering at the University of Houston POD. Justin explained, FEMA come in and don't know nobody. They called all the higher ups and administrators across the community and then they called the pastors, and then they got a hold of us. When asked why he was compelled to volunteer, he stated Well, damn. I got out of the storm pretty lucky. I have a tree resting against the house and the power's out, but I was getting pretty bored just sitting around. It was the least thing I could do to get out here and help my neighbors. Connected to this volunteer opportunity through his affiliation with the church, Justin expressed an important need for federal and state officials to tap into and mobilize local contacts and social networks to effectively deliver aid in disaster situations.

New technologies were also used in various ways to distribute information about and to recruit volunteers for the various relief operations. The volunteer coordinator for ACTS (Active Community Teams Services) explained to me that teams of local high school student volunteers were sent directly into the affected communities to report on needs among the residents. Many elderly or physically challenged individuals, for example, were not able to drive to the PODs or other relief centers directly to communicate their need. The student teams were equipped with cell phones and delivered text messages to the relief center so that essential services could be provided to these residents. When street signs or actual addresses could not be identified, some volunteers carried GPS/ GIS units to identify the coordinates of the affected homes so these could be reported to the

appropriate representatives. Warren a retired doctor volunteering with ACTS explained that "We send young people door to door out into the community and they send text messages back to call in critical needs." He pointed out that these new technologies like cell phone text messaging, micro blogging and instant messaging and the use of handheld GPS units helps FEMA sample the communities and provide them know when and where resources are needed or lacking. Many seniors are so overwhelmed that they cannot get out of their houses to come here or to report their needs. Warren explained that (local teens) are the only ones who know how to use these new technologies and know their way around the neighborhoods, so they are a vital resource.

While some relief efforts found a ready supply of well-coordinated and eager volunteers, other organizations continued to experience difficulty recruiting necessary volunteers. Many larger relief organizations like the Red Cross and the Salvation Army require an elaborate application, training, and screening process that must be cleared before entering into the disaster zone. Volunteers with credentials such as CPR or EMT certification or emergency response training were often given priority over relative newcomers. Accordingly, many organizational websites made explicit pleas for potential volunteers to resist self-deployment and to stay home and leave relief efforts to trained professionals, indicating that they would not be admitted on site without prior authorization. Jeff, one volunteer at Operation Blessing, a Christian based relief organization, indicated that he had tried to volunteer with Red Cross but the response from paid staff was that my help was not needed. So I came here. Other newcomers expressed frustration with delays in processing applications and assigning tasks. Jamie, a registered nurse from North Texas who I met volunteering at a Houston POD explained:

"As soon as I heard about the storm and all of the damage they had down here, I jumped in my car and came down for the weekend. I went over there (Red Cross) to see if I could volunteer and they had me fill out a bunch of paperwork. I sat around for about four hours waiting for them to process my application and another two or three hours to find me something to do-- somewhere I could help out. I don't fault them, I could tell they were all overwhelmed, but all I wanted to do is help. I ended up leaving and calling the number I heard on the radio and they sent me here (Houston POD)."

For some relief groups, their organizational affiliation prevented them from taking just anyone off the street to volunteer due to concerns about the safety and well being of their other volunteers as well as the reputation of their organization. Mike, a burly, retired construction contractor from Alabama who was working with the Southern Baptist Convention Disaster Relief team explained, "not just anyone can show up. Volunteers have to go through a two-week training program and become certified. Then they get placed on a call list and wait for a call to come and help out with the recovery. If they can't make it, they call the next person on their list, and so on." Roger, a fellow retiree from Alabama qualified the careful scrutiny that is placed on locating appropriate volunteers because "we don't want any trouble here. Disasters bring out all kinds of people if you know what I mean. We just want to keep things running smoothly here." This sentiment was expressed by several of the faith-based relief organizations whose

members were interested in serving alongside fellow Christians. However, even secular organizations were required to document and track their volunteer staff due to Homeland Security guidelines for disaster relief organizations.

### **The Networked Church: Operation Blessing and Mercy Chefs**

Traveling further southeast to the lower lying communities Beaumont and Bridge City, Texas, a number of different organizations were delivering supplies and serving hot meals to affected disaster victims. Because of the greater damage incurred in these areas, local resident volunteers were often in short supply. While many residents had evacuated prior to the storm, returning residents were consumed with repairing damage to their own properties. Volunteers at these locations often came from further away to serve affected residents and the large crew of first responders. Tom, a site director for Florida's Christian Disaster Response, explained that when he is not responding to disaster situations, he travels from church-to-church recruiting volunteers for their disaster relief team. Greg, a 24-year-old volunteer at the site explained 'just the other day I was out cutting the grass in the ditch out in front of the church so I could buy some cigarettes and my pastor said 'hey, you ain't doin' nothin'. Why don't you go up to Texas with (Tom)' and here I am. Paul, a long brown haired 34-year-old tree trimmer elaborated, 'when disaster strikes, (Tom) contacts the churches to see if they can send some people. That's how I got here. My pastor called me and he knew I owned a tree service and asked me if I could come down (from Michigan). He explained to me that since his work is seasonal, he has some flexibility in his schedule to volunteer at moment's notice. The work of organizations like Christian Disaster Response illustrates the necessity of strong organizational leadership in recruiting citizen volunteers to the disaster site, many of whom traveled from out of state to aid in relief efforts.

Demonstrating similar flexibility in her schedule and willingness to travel to affected areas, Suzie, a retired chef, came to the Gulf Coast from her native state of Georgia. 'They called me and a day later I was on my way down here.' A youthful and energetic 40-year-old, Suzie was a professional chef who worked in various restaurants in Georgia. Now retired, she started her relief work shortly after Hurricane Katrina volunteering for Mercy Chefs, a network of professional chefs who use their culinary skills to help feed disaster victims. Centered in Portsmouth, VA, the parent organization mobilizes its network of volunteers by calling available chefs in the event of a disaster. Suzie explained that point people are activated and dispatched to the affected region immediately after a significant disaster event. Once an appropriate location is identified, these scouts handle logistics with local officials, while the volunteer chefs trailer their mobile kitchens and set up at designated relief center sites. Once there, kitchens like hers are equipped to serve six thousand meals per day and filter thousands of gallons of water made ready to drink. The gasoline powered generator and propane heat also provides necessary fuel to produce the meals.

I met Suzie during my volunteer experience at Operation Blessing, a Christian non-profit relief organization that was partnering with Mercy Chefs. Operation Blessing was housed in a large modern church campus. Since I arrived in the early stages of the relief



operation, volunteers consisted of a very few church parishoners and a few outside guests. Wanda, a resident volunteer who was checking me in at the front desk explained that most parishoners had evacuated or were consumed with their own disaster recovery, and thus were unable to volunteer. To fill the need for volunteers, the organization utilized a vast database of thousands of former volunteers who had worked with their disaster relief center in the past. For example, Katherine, a 33 year-old housewife from Tyler, Texas responded to Hurricanes Rita and Katrina by volunteering with Operation Blessing. Katherine explained

YSince we were involved with the disaster in New Orleans, they had our name and number. We were deciding to come down here to help out anyway. But they called and told us where they were settin' up, and we got down here right away. We drove down, my husband and me, as soon as we made sure everything on our property was sound.Φ

While volunteers like Katherine tapped into her previous experience as a disaster volunteer in Louisiana to assist in the relief efforts Yright in her back yard.Φ the parent organization tapped into an elaborate network of religious groups and organizations to staff their operation.

Volunteers, like Roy, a retired caterer and florist from Kentucky explained that he heard about Operation Blessing on the 700 Club (a live national religiously themed television program on the Christian Broadcasting Network). Roy explained that he saw Pat Robertson interviewing the president of O.B. and discovered that there were relief efforts unfolding in Texas. Roy explained YI got my affairs in order and left the next day-- yesterday-- and drove 18 hours straight here.Φ He explained that he had performed missionary work in China and South America in the past, so he had prior experience with disaster relief but had never volunteered with OB. Though he came to Texas with the intention of cooking meals for disaster victims, an able bodied 67 year old, Roy was put to work gutting out a home in the flooded swampland area of East Texas. Throughout my brief stay, I witnessed a number of volunteers arrive to the site with a similar story.

Chris, a paid staff member of Operation Blessing explained that the organization supports 4 four full time staff and that many others are Yon callΦ to serve when needed. When asked how he got involved, he stated, Ylike most of us, it started with hurricane Katrina. A lot of us got our experience volunteering with relief operations there and eventually turned into permanent staff positions. I don't think any of us actually thought we would be doing this kind of work if you would have asked us a few years ago.Φ Chris, like many other relief staff I met had some prior experience working in disaster related fields and used this experience to respond to the unique challenges faced by the local community.

### **Drawing from Subcultural Networks: American Rainbow Rapid Response**

While religious relief groups like Operation Blessing, Christian Disaster Relief, and Southern Baptist Disaster Relief drew volunteers from a loosely connected group of

churches and religious organizations across the country, others drew their volunteer crews from more secular sources. American Rainbow Rapid Response (ARRR) drew from a countercultural network of volunteers who participated in the annual gatherings of the Rainbow Family (see Niman, 1997). Loosely associated with the touring music subculture of the Grateful Dead and Phish, the Rainbow Family draws a young and geographically mobile population of college aged and older individuals with a spirit for travel and adventure. The affectionately named YHippie KitchenΦ drew its volunteers from vast networks of participants who united through e-mail distribution lists, blogs, and social networking sites devoted to their common subcultural interests. Most of the core participants started their disaster response with Hurricane Katrina by volunteering with mobile kitchens in Waveland, Mississippi and St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana and remained in contact electronically since the 2005 storm. Equipped with a DIY (do it yourself) attitude, these volunteers came from miles around after they received e-mails or read blog postings about the need for volunteers. Jesse and Amanda, a couple from Ohio drove 18 hours to the disaster site and were there to volunteer at the mobile kitchen indefinitely. They explained, Ywe are here until we need to move on.Φ Though they did not know any of the other volunteers directly, they explained that a common interest in the Rainbow Family subculture identified participants as Ypeople like usΦ with a shared set of values and lifestyles.

Lenny, an intense 43 year-old volunteer with ARRR explained that he developed his interest in serving storm victims based on a mobile kitchen he uses to feed the homeless and hungry in Missouri. He explained that his mobile YOz KitchenΦ participates in Yguerilla feedingΦ across the country. He explained that his team of chefs identifies areas of need and provides free meals to anyone who comes by to eat. YWe serve a lot of areas with a lot of homeless and poor folks. We drive straight into the poorest areas and set up our kitchen. I mean, food is a civil right, man. It's a human right.Φ He explained that since Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, he had spent a lot of time in the Gulf Coast assisting with relief and support for relief volunteers and has a vast network of friends and former volunteers who are always willing to come down and help out.

## **Conclusion**

This study aimed to achieve a better understanding of the role that grassroots volunteers and citizen response groups play in direct disaster relief efforts. By examining the processes and channels through which volunteers were contacted, recruited, and mobilized by grassroots organizations after Hurricane Ike, I found that organizational and interpersonal networks developed prior to the storm create forms of social capital (Putnam, 2000) that are essential for volunteers' coordinated mobilization.

These forms of social capital grew from both strong and weak ties (Granovetter, 1973). Strong ties grew out of formal membership in religious or civic groups with well-established roles, responsibilities, and relationships to fellow members. These networks were activated at moment's notice and calls for help cycled down the chain of command to reach the rank and volunteers. YWeakΦ ties grew from volunteers informal affiliation with cultural or subcultural groups, impersonal networks, and communities centered on

common interests (activities or hobbies), or that share common values (religious or political). Though less tangible and largely invisible, these weak ties have been instrumental in mobilizing volunteers to participate in relief organizations, especially when volunteers are needed from outside of the local area or region.

The spontaneous volunteers I studied demonstrated high levels of social capital. Most had an affiliation with a sponsoring agency or some connection to a local church, community group, or fraternal organization. Individual volunteers explained that they were active in their neighborhoods and were involved with local neighborhood associations, civic groups, or grassroots community organizations. Though these findings will need to be elaborated and refined by further research and in other disaster settings, it is clear that social capital developed prior to the storm plays a vital role in spontaneous disaster volunteerism.

These findings will be useful to emergency planners in building volunteer capacity for future emergencies. Specifically, FEMA, Red Cross and other relief agencies should tap into existing social networks and stock of local social capital to effectively recruit volunteer relief workers when responding to disaster situations.

### **References:**

- Adler, Patricia A. and Peter Adler. 1987. Membership Roles in Field Research. Sage.
- Allahyari, Rebecca Anne. 2000. Visions of Charity. Volunteer Workers and Moral Community. Berkely: University of California Press.
- Baltimore, Chris. 2008. YWeakened Ike moves on after battering Gulf coastΦ Reuters, Sun. Sept 14, 2008  
URL: [http://www.reuters.com/article/homepageCrisis/idUSN14431865.\\_CH\\_.2400](http://www.reuters.com/article/homepageCrisis/idUSN14431865._CH_.2400)
- Baltimore, Chris and Anna Driver. 2008. ΦHurricane Ike Rakes Texas Coast, HoustonΦ Reuters. Sat. Sept 13, 2008.  
URL: [http://www.reuters.com/article/homepageCrisis/idUSN13445757.\\_CH\\_.2400](http://www.reuters.com/article/homepageCrisis/idUSN13445757._CH_.2400)
- Carney, Mike. YHurricane Ike: Galveston says 25% ignored evacuation orderΦ. September 12, 2008. USA Today: On Deadline.  
URL: <http://blogs.usatoday.com/ondeadline/2008/09/hurricane-ike-g.html>
- Drabek, Tom. 1986. Human System Responses to Disaster: An Inventory of Sociological Findings. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Granovetter, Mark. 1973. "The Strength of Weak Ties"; American Journal of Sociology, Vol. 78, No. 6., May 1973, pp 1360-1380

- Lowe, Seana. 2002. Community Response in a Terrorist Disaster. Quick Response Research Report #144. Boulder, Colorado: Natural Hazards Research and Applications Information Center, University of Colorado. URL: <http://www.colorado.edu/hazards/qr/qr144/qr144.html>
- Majchrzak, Ann Sirkka L. Jarvenpaa, Andrea B. Hollingshead. 2007. Coordinating Expertise Among Emergent Groups Responding to Disasters. *Organization Science*. Vol. 18, No. 1, January- February, pp. 147-161
- Niman, Michael. 1997. People of the Rainbow: A Nomadic Utopia. Knoxville University of Tennessee Press.
- Putnam, Robert. 2000. Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Tierney, Kathleen, M. Lindell, and R. Perry. 2001. Facing the Unexpected: Disaster Preparedness and Response in the United States. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.
- Stallings, Robert A. and E.L. Quarantelli. 1985. Emergent Citizen Groups and Emergency Management. *Public Administration Review*. 45: 93-100.