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## Quick Response Report #152

# Marginalized Groups in Times of Crisis: Identity, Needs, and Response

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# INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research examines the impacts of a large-scale disaster on a marginalized community. Specifically, both practical and more abstract effects of the attacks of September 11, 2001, on the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community in New York City are examined.

A large-scale disaster of this nature naturally precipitates increased needs for services, changes in the types of services needed, and differential responses by service organizations to the changed needs. Additionally, in times of large-scale crisis, the need to feel a sense of solidarity with one's community increases. The combined effect of these two needs often results in the emergence of new types of community solidarity as divisions between communities temporarily disappear or become less salient and people attempt to help those in need, regardless of the lack of any previous social ties with them.

This emergent solidarity is complicated, however, by the reality of pre-existing marginalization of minority groups, including racial and ethnic minorities, religious minorities, and the lesbian/gay/bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community. In these marginalized communities, the pull toward supporting and being supported by larger society during times of crisis may be complicated by a number of factors. First, many minority communities have organizations designed to provide services specifically for their population. For members of these communities, the tendency is often to turn to these organizations rather than more mainstream organizations for health, mental health, social, educational, and other services when they are needed. In the wake of a large-scale crisis, members of marginalized communities may feel pulled toward their own community, while at the same time feeling pulled toward larger society. Additionally, members of minority communities may continue to feel the legacy of their exclusion from mainstream society, just as they are feeling a need to be a part of that larger group.

This tension leads to a number of questions regarding the needs of members of marginalized communities, the services being provided to those communities, and the ways in which these communities construct and re-construct their identity. At a conceptual level, these questions center around issues of identity. When people feel a pull toward affiliating with others "as an American," but also feel a need for solidarity with one's own sub-group, how do people negotiate these dual or multiple identities? In other words, how do people continue to identify with their community, or is this identity subsumed under a broader identity?

On a more practical level, what are the needs of people with multiple identities and how are these needs met, either by organizations within their community or through less specific organizations? Conversely, how do they participate in providing services for victims? Do they specifically focus on members of their own community (or utilize these services, if necessary), or do they turn toward participation in broader services? Similarly, how do these specialized organizations respond to disasters? Do they attempt to provide resources and services to their own community only, or do they expand them to help people outside their target population? Do they attempt to provide additional resources that they did not provide before the disaster, to address the emergent needs of their community? If not, do they direct their constituents to mainstream organizations or simply not provide the service or a referral?

In the days, weeks, and months following the terrorist attacks in New York City, these questions were particularly salient in the LGBT community. New York City has a large and active LGBT community, and a number of organizations exist that provide services for this population. This community was affected in many of the same ways as the non-LGBT community, as individuals lost family members and friends, apartments and jobs, and were traumatized by the attacks. They were affected in unique ways, too, especially when relief efforts began. For example, as the request for donated blood became urgent, gay men found themselves excluded from participating in a helping behavior that many found to be therapeutic and community-building. This exclusion was angering to many in the community who were shocked to find themselves excluded, even in a time of such need.

Another unique impact, one that has certainly had more long term and more pervasive effects, is related to provision of relief. As relief efforts began, organizations such as the Red Cross, other volunteer relief services, and city and state organizations found themselves in need of some official definition of "family" in order to determine eligibility for services. As requests for information, emotional support, financial assistance, and other emergency assistance began to be made by surviving same-sex partners and families of people killed in the attacks, the organizations providing these services were forced to make determinations about eligibility. Most of these definitions of family resulted in the exclusion of same-sex partners and families.

As a result of this exclusion, the LGBT community responded in a number of ways. First, individuals within the community expressed a great deal of anxiety, sadness, anger and surprise about this newly discovered sense of exclusion, particularly at a time when most non-LGBT people were feeling a strong sense of solidarity with others as "Americans." Second, many LGBT organizations that ordinarily focused on other issues redirected their efforts to address the needs of the community that were not being met by mainstream relief organizations. Third, both individuals and organizations in the community became politically mobilized by the situation lobbying for inclusion of LGBT people in relief efforts and distribution of financial resources; for recognition of LGBT people in definitions of family; and for acknowledgement of the losses, efforts, and rights of LGBT people in the aftermath of the attacks.

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## **METHODOLOGY**

From September 28 to September 30, 2001, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with key leaders of LGBT organizations in New York City and with individual members of the LGBT community. Participant observation at the LGBT Community Center, the New York City Metropolitan Community Church, and in the Chelsea neighborhood supplemented interview data. Both while on site and subsequently, content analysis was conducted of documents related to attempts to provide relief efforts to people within the LGBT community who were affected by the attacks. Documents included press releases, newspaper articles, letters, web sites, and other publications produced by LGBT political and community organizations, mainstream relief and political organizations, the New York Times, and several LGBT newspapers.

Interviews with leaders of LGBT organizations focused on understanding the perceptions of community leaders of the needs of the LGBT community and the response of these organizations to these needs. Interviews with individuals in the community focused on gaining a sense of the needs of the community and identifying individual perceptions about the impact of the attacks on the LGBT community and on themselves as members of the LGBT community. All interviews were tape recorded and have been transcribed. Analysis of the interviews is in process.

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## **FINDINGS**

Preliminary analysis of the interviews, field notes, and document review suggests that the attacks of September 11 had a unique effect on the LGBT community in New York City, that the LGBT community and its organizations worked to fill the gaps left by mainstream relief efforts, and that many of the needs of this community were not adequately met by existing organizations at the time and continue to be unmet to date.

At the time of the research, the community leaders who were interviewed were struggling to understand the impact of the attacks on the community and to begin formulating ways their organization could help. They were uncertain about whether the needs of LGBT survivors of the attacks were being met by mainstream organizations, and people in the community were just beginning to come forward to indicate that their needs were not being met. These leaders indicated that the needs of individuals within the LGBT community were not being met in a number of ways. First, every leader interviewed was aware of situations in which a same-sex partner of someone who had been killed or injured in the attacks had been denied services, information about their partner, or assistance that would have been provided to an opposite-sex partner. Second, these leaders indicated that they knew of LGBT people who had been affected by the attacks in other ways. For instance, they had not lost a partner to the attacks, but were generally traumatized; they had lost their job or apartment because of its proximity in or near the attack site; or they were afraid to access needed services from mainstream organizations due to their sexual orientation. Third, some people affected by the attacks had attempted to access mainstream organizations for services and had difficult, often re-traumatizing experiences because of their sexual orientation. As a result, leaders of organizations were attempting to assess their organization's ability to attempt to meet some of these needs.

In addition to attempting to understand the unmet needs of the community and how their organization might help, leaders were beginning to communicate with each other to try to coordinate efforts to provide assistance and referrals. For example, one organization was beginning to contact mainstream and LGBT organizations in an attempt to create a comprehensive list of resources that were available to surviving same-sex partners, as well as assemble a list of resources that were LGBT-friendly. Other organizations, such as the Anti-Violence Project and the New York Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Community Center, shifted gears after the attack and began working to address unmet needs, lobby for the rights and needs of the LGBT community, and organize vigils and fundraisers. In response to requests from LGBT survivors for financial help and requests from people who wanted to donate

to LGBT survivors, another organization, the Empire State Pride Agenda (ESPA), created a fund for those purposes.

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## CONCLUSION

Efforts to address the unmet needs of the LGBT community are ongoing as are efforts to determine eligibility for services and resources. The LGBT organizations in New York City continue to be focused on meeting these needs and navigating through the resources that are available. Additionally, many of these organizations are now involved in lobbying efforts to change the way that "family" is defined in order to make services and resources more available to the LGBT community in the event of future attacks or disasters. This research project will continue to track these efforts and will include analysis of the efforts, successes, and challenges.

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