

COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS IN JACKSON, MISSISSIPPI: TACKLING AN ONGOING WATER CRISIS AND FLOODING

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VIRGINIA TECH

As a member of the Virginia Tech community, I acknowledge the Tutelo/Monacan Peoples, who are the traditional custodians of the land upon which we work and live, and I recognize their continuing connection to the land, water, and air that Virginia Tech consumes each day. As a land grant university, we collectively pay our respects to these Nations, and to their Elders past, present, and emerging.

RESEARCH QUESTION



How does organizational learning affect community-based organizations in the onset-sudden and chronic disasters within Jackson, Mississippi?



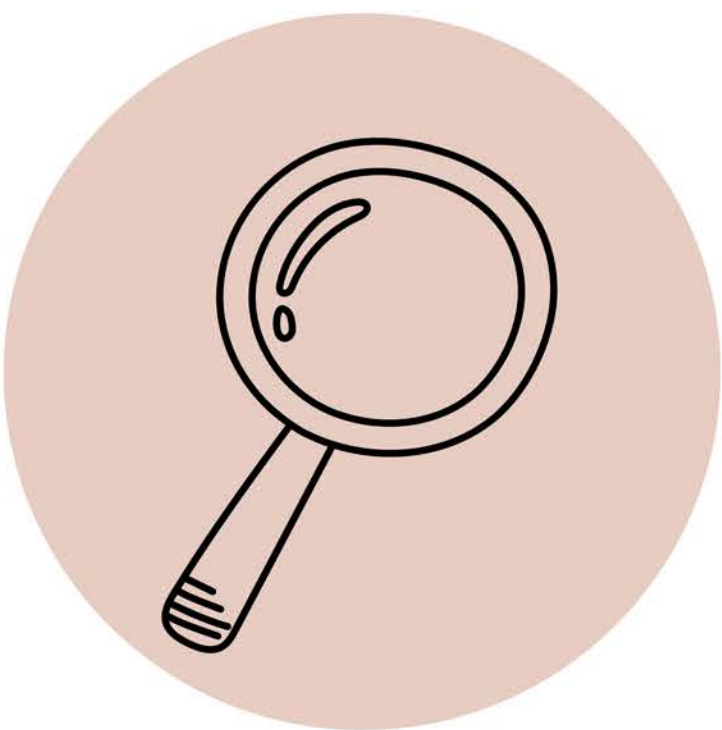
ANALYSIS

To analyze the qualitative data, I utilized Otter.ai to generate a transcript, quality-checked the transcriptions by hand, and then uploaded the documents to Dedoose. I used line-by-line inductive coding to create emergent codes and sub-codes. These codes were related to Organizational Learning theory, events related to disaster preparedness and response actions, and additional recurring themes.

METHODS

Community-based organizations (CBOs) included nongovernmental, faith-based, and place-based organizations within Hinds County. The organizations also had to provide at least one of the following five services: food, health/mental health, housing, social services, or multiple services. I created a database of 66 organizations from which I recruited participants. The database contained contact information for resources listed on the United Way of the Capital Area website (<https://www.myunitedway.com/211>) and a Google search for social services in Hinds County. I used data from 16 semi-structured interviews conducted over Zoom to answer my research question. Each interview took place with a CBO director.

FINDINGS



What Flood?

"In terms of literal flooding. No, not at all. We didn't have any flood damage." [CBO 14]

Only one organization interviewed was directly affected by the 2022 Pearl River flood. Many CBO directors made comments similar to the quote above. The director of CBO 14 stated that their organization was not in the flood zone but was heavily affected by the closure of the O.B. Curtis Water Treatment Plant.

The Jackson Water Crisis

"After a couple days, waiting to see what the city plan and the State plan was, and not getting anywhere really. We said, 'Okay, what can we do? How can we? ... How can we get bottled water? Where can we store it?' And then what's really amazing is you end up hearing from all over the country people wanting to bring tractor trailer loads of water." [CBO 5]

The director of CBO 5, a seasoned expert in managing water insecurity, had years of experience assisting their neighborhood during such challenging times. The organization's typical approach was to adopt a wait-and-see strategy. However, the period following the devastating Pearl River flood in 2022, which garnered significant media attention, led to an unprecedented influx of donations.

Learning From and Through Disasters

"We grow to do a better job of our reason for existing and our reason for existing is to eliminate hunger ... so different agencies will come and go, disasters come and go, and we respond to the extent that we can..." [CBO 3]

The director of CBO 3 expressed that the organization has a role to play within the community, and they do not intend to fill other needs outside of the organization's mission. To better prepare for disasters, they opted to permanently rent a generator due to frequent power outages in their building. Other directors expressed that disasters showed gaps in serving their neighborhoods and have grown to fill unmet needs.

Disaster Preparedness: A Culture of Response

Many of the CBO directors interviewed referred to Hinds County as a low-resource community that has experienced many disasters. All directors spoke of partnerships they had established to best serve their neighborhoods. The director of CBO 1 shared how they introduce themselves to other CBO directors and ask how they can support their mission, while the director of CBO 11 called Mississippi a "networking state" that is "three degrees of separation" between a person in need and a person who could help.

Furthermore, when asked about their experiences with sudden onset and chronic disasters, many directors shared stories of the COVID-19 lockdown. They acknowledged the hardships it brought but also highlighted the proactive measures taken by CBOs. The pandemic provided an opportunity to invest in updating preparedness plans and technology. This included implementing better work-from-home policies and providing laptops, which enabled CBO 10 to be better prepared for severe winter storms and to continue offering services to their neighbors.



CONCLUSION

Future research should consider adding theories of recreancy and social network analysis to analyze the role of CBOs in Jackson, MS. The city will continue to face issues accessing clean drinking water while responding to sudden-onset disasters like heavy rain, winter freezes, and flood events. This research showed that while sudden-onset disasters may not be at the forefront of disaster preparedness, they intensify the city's ongoing water crisis. Even though the city has dealt with water insecurity for decades, a flood event, like the one in 2022, can draw more media attention and allow CBOs to gather resources through donations. These donations help residents of Jackson cope with periods of higher water insecurity. Lastly, while COVID-19 has brought great hardships to people worldwide, in Jackson, it may have also increased organizational capacity to respond to disasters. During the COVID-19 lockdown, social services like SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) received additional funding, and government organizations opened funding opportunities for nonprofits, such as those associated with the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021. CBOs used these resources to pay staff, maximize outreach, invest in laptops, and build more sustainable programs.

THESIS AND REFERENCES:

