Are You Trustworthy?

Community Gatekeepers and Vulnerable Communities

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The Problem

Trust failures during disasters **disproportionately harm marginalized populations.** When African Americans drowned during Hurricane Katrina, when Puerto Ricans died in the aftermath of Maria, when undocumented immigrants lost their homes to wildfires, these were **not random tragedies,** but systematic failures rooted in distrust of institutions that have historically failed vulnerable populations.

Overview of Eastern North Carolina

Location & Size: 41 counties in eastern NC, from Fall Line to Atlantic Ocean

Geography: Flat Coastal Plain terrain, rivers, wetlands, barrier islands

Major Cities: Greenville, Wilmington, Jacksonville, Rocky Mount, New Bern, Goldsboro, Wilson, Fayetteville

Subregions: Outer Banks, Inner Banks, Crystal Coast, Lower Cape Fear, Sandhills

Natural Hazards: Hurricanes, flooding from coastal storms

Demographics: Rural population, higher African American percentage than state average

Source: https://waywelivednc.com/maps/eastern.html

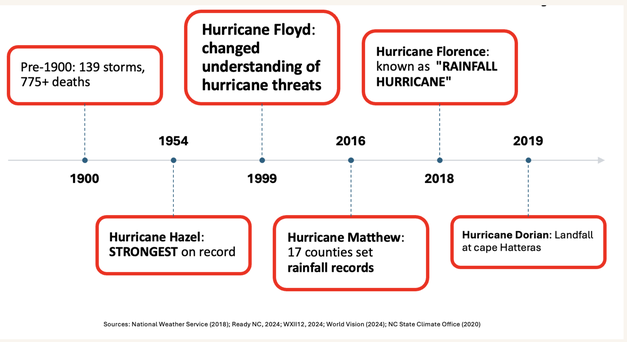
Tourism: Beaches, Outer Banks, historic New Bern, outdoor recreation

Infrastructure: Ports, airports, rail connections, 60+ freight carriers

Education: East Carolina University, 23 community colleges, workforce development programs

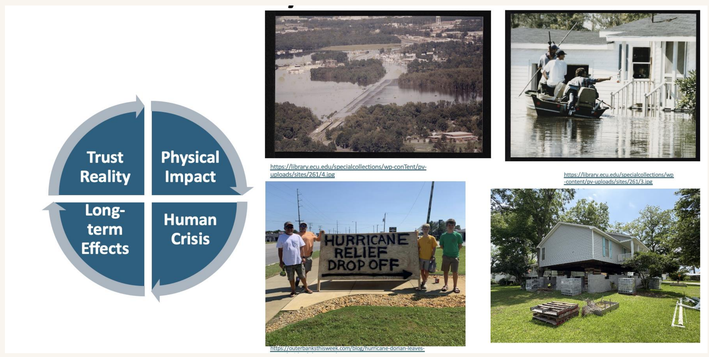
Transportation: I-95, I-40, I-795, US-17, US-64, US-264, major freight/shipping corridors

Eastern North Carolina Hurricane History



Sources: National Weather Service (2018); Ready NC, 2024; WXII12, 2024; World Vision (2024); NC State Climate Office (2020)

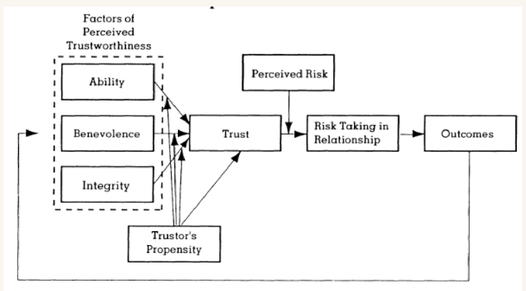
The Reality of Disaster Context



Research Question

Do emergency managers believe they **DESERVE** the trust that vulnerable communities place in them?

Integrative Model of Organizational Trust

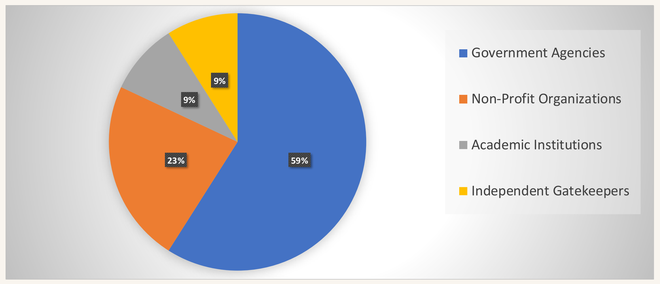


(Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995)

Trustworthiness Factors:
- **Ability**
- **Benevolence**
- **Integrity**

Additional Element:
- **Propensity to Trust**

Methodology



Community Gatekeepers by Organizational Affiliation

African Americans | Hispanics/Latinos | Low-income
Rural communities | Immigrants | Undocumented
Older adults | Refugees | Disabilities
Pregnant women | LGBTQ+ | Veterans | Renters
First Nations | Children

Mentions of Marginalized Populations Served

Findings

Government Agencies

Perception of Trust

Voluntary/ Non-Profit orgs.

Individual Gatekeepers

Voices from the Field

Historical Distrust
"Trust is eroded over time — particularly around Hurricane Floyd and how that buyout was run. That created some distrust."
— Government Agency

Generational Trauma
"We have a lot of generational issues that stem all the way back to the Civil War. This type of trauma takes many, many generations to overcome."
— Voluntary / Non-Profit Organization

Gender & Geography
"The rural location seemed to find it harder to have that conversation. And I also feel like being a female plays a role."
— Government Agency

Economic Vulnerability & Distrust
"Less well-off people tend to be more less trusting."
— Independent Gatekeeper

Keeping Promises
"If somebody makes a promise, we have to keep it — even if we have to break a rule to get it done."
— Voluntary / Non-Profit Organization

Time & Presence
"I consider myself to be trustworthy now. To date, I haven't gotten something for somebody that we said we would."
— Government Agency

Institutional Skepticism
"Because I am from the government... there's the distrust of the government and there's distrust of maybe my message."
— Government Agency

Key Takeaways

1. **Trust is life and death**
   Trust failures cost lives. Trust in local government significantly increases evacuation likelihood. This is not a soft issue. It determines who survives a disaster.
2. **Trust is built before disaster**
   Community relationships, presence, and consistency must be established long before a storm hits. Emergency agencies cannot build trust during a crisis. They can only spend what they already have.
3. **Gatekeepers are the bridge**
   Community gatekeepers including religious leaders, nonprofit workers, and neighborhood advocates mediate between residents and institutions. Partnering with them is essential for reaching populations who distrust formal agencies.

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