Public Emergencies and Diverse Communities

BY PSD RESEARCH

Cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity is a defining feature of many of Canada's cities and towns. Nationwide, over 16 percent of the Canadian population is described by Statistics Canada as a visible minority, but these minority groups are concentrated in the country's largest cities. Of the over five million people living in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), 43 percent are visible minorities. Approximately 27 percent of GTA residents speak a language other than English and French at home, and four percent has no knowledge of either of the two official languages. Likewise, 42 percent of the Greater Vancouver Area's population is defined as visible minorities, and five percent (amounting to over 100,000 residents) has no official-language knowledge.

Canada's diversity has important implications for emergency planning. The outbreak of H1N1 influenza earlier this year has exposed strains in the public health system, and authorities across the country are preparing for a resurgence of the flu this coming winter. Crucial to these planning efforts are the unique barriers faced by minority groups during public emergencies. Such emergencies—be they natural or manmade disasters, or health related—place intense strain on individual, community, and governmental resources.

For those living at or below the poverty line, with weak official language skills, and little knowledge of government services, such events can be devastating. Hurricane Katrina, which ravaged New Orleans in 2005, demonstrated the true extent of how public emergencies disproportionately effect minority groups. Post-Katrina research showed that the areas most impacted by the storm were largely inhabited by poor African-Americans, many of whom did not receive orders to evacuate, or were unable to leave.[1]

In the aftermath of Katrina, a renewed research effort has been made to devise ways to better integrate diversity into community safety strategies. The impetus for this integration is clear: Communities are better prepared for crises when the unique needs of minority groups are fully accounted for in emergency planning. The Center for Health Equality at the Drexel University School of Public Health, based out of Philadelphia, has been working to advance programs and policies that explicitly integrate minorities in emergency planning and response. With support from the U.S. Government's Office of Minority Health, the Center has undertaken two unique initiatives: (1) Creation of a *National Consensus Panel on Emergency Preparedness and Cultural Diversity* (NCP) to develop a cohesive set of priorities and guidance on including minorities in emergency planning and response; and (2) Creation of an online resource center and information exchange site devoted exclusively to the preparedness of diverse communities (www.diversitypreparedness.org). The *Digest* spoke with representatives of the Center about risks faced by minority groups, and how these risks can be overcome.

I.
SOURCES OF VULNERABILITY

Several factors are at work in making diverse communities more vulnerable to public emergencies. These include: Language barriers, a lack of material resources, higher levels of distrust of public authorities, differences in information seeking, and varied levels of risk perception.

Language barriers

The most obvious complicating factor for diverse communities is the variety in languages. As part of an emergency planning and response effort, governments must transmit risk communication messages to the public at large. These messages identify sources of danger, explain how events are unfolding, and inform residents of the appropriate courses of action to protect themselves. In the Canadian context, these messages are typically transmitted via mass media, and principally employ either English or French. Although many individuals in diverse groups may have a working knowledge of either of these languages, the level of comprehension may be far below what is needed to fully understand the messages. In the crucial moments before Hurricane Katrina made landfall, for example, many members of New Orleans' Asian-American population did not evacuate because they did not fully understand evacuation orders.

Material means

Statistics Canada has found that recent and mid-term immigrants are more likely to experience low income than the rest of the population; three out of four of these recent immigrants, and three out five mid-term immigrants, are visible minorities.[2] For individuals attempting to cope with a public emergency, low income status introduces a number of stressors. In regards to health emergencies, those with low incomes may find it harder to take time off work to recover from illness, or to tend to a sick child. These individuals may therefore be unable to isolate themselves to prevent further spread of the illness. Furthermore, individuals who lack personal transportation and who live in rental housing are particularly susceptible to natural disasters.

Without a personal vehicle, these residents are heavily reliant on public authorities to provide the means to leave a city should evacuation be necessary. Moreover, individuals living in rented homes may be unable to make the kind

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[1] Dennis P. Andrulis, Nadia J. Siddiqui, and Jenna L. Gantner, *Preparing Racially and Ethnically Diverse Communities for Public Health Emergencies*, Health Affairs, (26) 5, 2007.

[2] Statistics Canada, *Low Income Among Immigrants and Visible Minorities*, Perspectives on Labour and Income, (5) 4, 2004.
Url: http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/75-001-x/10404/6843-eng.htm

of structural changes necessary to protect their home from an incoming storm. Although most authorities recommend preparing a stockpile of food and water so that residents can maintain a level of self-sufficiency in the immediate aftermath of an emergency, the mere ability to purchase such goods is out of reach for those barely able to cover existing monthly costs.

Levels of distrust

There may be low levels of trust between residents and government authorities, particularly first responders such as the police. Communities that feel marginalized, ignored, or harassed by public authorities are hesitant to follow government recommendations, or to seek assistance during an emergency. This avoidance of government is particularly common among undocumented immigrants, who fear being caught and deported. In October 2007, a series of wildfires burned across Southern California, reaching down to US-Mexico border. A study released in the aftermath by the National Latino Research Center at California State University, San Marcos, indicated that migrant and farmworker populations were disproportionately impacted by the fires. In part, this was because some members of these communities feared deportation to such an extent that they did not evacuate their homes, despite being in mandatory evacuation zones.[3]

Information seeking

Due to language barriers and cultural norms, members of diverse communities often gather information from informal sources. For example, conversations with friends and family or neighborhood meetings can serve as the primary source of information. Along with suffering from a relative lack of accuracy and consistency, these informal channels work more slowly than mainstream sources, often leaving communities inadequately prepared for a potential emergency.

Risk perception

In other cases, immigrant communities may display lower levels of perceived personal risk.[4] In many parts of the world, concerns over potential health emergencies and natural disasters are trumped by the more immediate dangers posed by political, social, or ethnic turmoil. Relocating to Canada may mean leaving these dangers behind, but the relatively low level of attention given to potential public emergencies is retained.

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II.
PLANNING

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By recognizing these barriers, public authorities can begin to design emergency plans that comprehensively address the needs of ethnically and culturally diverse communities. Drawing on the U.S. National Consensus Panel's recommendations, such a plan would include at least two critical elements.

First, public authorities must identify minority populations, and assess their unique needs. This effort will require an understanding of the elements of a community's culture, the languages that are spoken, and the predominant economic conditions. Several approaches can be used to gather this information. Publicly available data is a good starting point. For example, Statistics Canada's Community Profiles[5] provide aggregate information on language abilities, minority population characteristics, and income levels. Additionally, the organization maintains Census Tract profiles for smaller areas of 2,500 to 8,000 people. Sources such as these provide useful quantitative data on local populations, but should be complimented with qualitative approaches.

In this case, public authorities can identify community or faith-based leaders who can act as liaisons between the government and particular neighborhoods. As mentioned, low levels of trust in government may be common in some minority populations, making it difficult for government officials to directly gather information from residents. By seeking the input of 'gatekeepers', public officials can learn a great deal about the distinct challenges and needs faced by members of a community.

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[3] National Latino Research Center, *San Diego Firestorm Report 2007: Fire Impact on Farmworkers and Migrant Communities in North County*, 2007.
Url: http://www2.csusm.edu/nlrc/publications/Reports/NLRC%20Wildfires%20Report%202007%20Rev.pdf
[4] Andrulis, Siddiqui, and Gantner, *Preparing Racially and Ethnically Diverse Communities for Public Health Emergencies*, 2007.
[5] Url: http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2006/dp-pd/prof/92-591/index.cfm?Lang=E

A second important element is a detailed evaluation of the community's assets. Faith-based organizations, community-based organizations, cultural associations, neighborhood centers, and ethnic media outlets are all valuable resources in disseminating information and coordinating emergency preparedness. Further, the U.S. National Consensus Panel recommends establishing a registry of bilingual community volunteers that can be called on to provide translation and interpretation between the government and diverse communities.[6]

The needs and asset assessment is an ongoing activity, and should be frequently updated to ensure that the information that is being used for planning purposes remains relevant. Beyond these activities, the U.S. National Consensus Panel recommends that government response agencies build their capacity to respond to the needs of minority populations. The first step in this regard is to ensure that emergency information is appropriately translated. The key concern here is not simply providing a verbatim translation of English information; many concepts and words may not translate exactly to other languages, making these messages difficult to understand.[7] Allowing community representatives to vet messages before they are distributed will help ensure that these communications are clearly articulated and culturally competent. Beyond translation, authorities should begin building cooperative relationships with community members so that lines of communication and coordination are established before an emergency strikes. Such ongoing collaboration will permit emergency planners to develop practice scenarios that are tailored to the neighborhoods and communities in need.

8 Principles for Integrating Diverse Communities into Health Emergency Planning

1. Identifying, locating, and maintaining a profile of diverse racial/ethnic, immigrant, and limited English proficient (LEP) populations within the community.

2. Establishing sustainable partnerships between community representatives and the public health preparedness system to assess, build, and sustain trust with ethnic, immigrant, and LEP populations.

3. Engaging community representatives to design, implement, and evaluate emergency risk communication strategies, ensuring that they are culturally and linguistically appropriate.

4. Developing and testing drills and exercises that reflect the community and incorporate scenarios that explicitly take into account situations involving culturally and linguistically diverse populations.

5. Building capacity within the public health preparedness system to respond to unique needs of diverse communities.

6. Measuring and evaluating emergency plans and actions from preparedness to recovery, ensuring the active involvement of participants from the public health preparedness system and the community in a continual process of review.

7. Coordinating information, resources, and actions within and across organizations as well as with diverse communities in a concerted effort to maximize compliance and adherence to preparedness practices.

8. Ensuring the availability of funds to develop and sustain services, programs, and policies that strengthen diverse communities.

Source: *National Consensus Statement on Integrating Racially and Ethnically Diverse Communities into Public Health Emergency Preparedness.*
Url: http://www.diversitypreparedness.org/NCP/92/

South of the border, authorities at the state and local level have devised initiatives specifically aimed at including the concerns of diverse and minority populations in emergency planning. In Minnesota, the Emergency Community Health Outreach network works in conjunction with a public television station to set aside time for representatives from refugee, immigrant, and ethnic groups to speak in multiple languages about personal emergency planning, the role of government in emergency response, and other topics relating to preparedness.[8] In San Francisco, the NICOS Health Coalition organized a Chinatown Disaster Response Program. Along with training volunteers to lead preparedness efforts, the Coalition coordinates a disaster drill in Chinatown.[9]

III.
THE OBLIGATION TO PREPARE

Individuals living in diverse communities experience a number of barriers to emergency preparedness. Failing to take account of these unique barriers exposes these residents, and the community at large, to higher levels of risk.

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[6] *National Consensus Statement on Integrating Racially and Ethnically Diverse Communities into Public Health Emergency Preparedness*, 2008.
Url: http://www.diversitypreparedness.org/NCP/92/
[7] Andrulis, Siddiqui, and Gantner, *Preparing Racially and Ethnically Diverse Communities for Public Health Emergencies*, 2007.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.

Instead of viewing language and cultural diversity as a challenge, municipal leaders should regard all residents as important stakeholders in community safety. Establishing cooperative relationships with community leaders, faith-based and community organizations, and other access points is the foundation for including minority groups in emergency planning.