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## Who Did You Call Following the Boston Marathon Bombing?

*Volunteers Needed for a Study to Find Out*

*Guest post drafted by Dr. David Lazer, PhD and Dr. Drew Margolin, PhD of Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts*

"I am OK."

When two bombs went off at the Boston Marathon, three people were killed, hundreds of people were injured, and millions of people were scared and confused. Among the worries and wonders were thoughts such as: What is happening? Are the people I care about OK? Do the people who care about me know that I am OK? How could something like this happen? What can I do?

In a terrible moment like this, people reach out to their social network—their friends, family, neighbors.

And in an unexpected crisis, the fastest way to reach out to someone you know is through their mobile phone. Family members can be reached almost instantly, no matter where they are. Neighbors can come to our aid. Close friends can help us make sense of horrifying events. A better understanding is needed of how social network activities help inform emergency response efforts to disseminate information rapidly in the first moments of a crisis.

Northeastern University in Boston has just launched a study of how mobile phones are used for communication around emergencies, with two surveys to examine phone use during [Hurricane Sandy](#), and after the bombings at the [Boston Marathon](#). Both surveys utilize special Android apps that, while preserving privacy, identify the contacts that participants spoke to and texted with most frequently during and after these events. The app then generates a survey that asks participants about how they were affected by events (e.g., Did they lose electricity during Sandy? How near the bombings were they?), their relationships to important contacts, as well as questions about their reliance on social and mainstream media.

In addition, the apps ask how their social networks affected people's ability to get the information, resources, and emotional support that they needed at that moment. The contrast between Hurricane Sandy and the Marathon bombing allows for a comparison between an anticipated and unanticipated emergency (e.g., Were mobile phones important in the latter?), and allows examination of how infrastructure failure resulted in substitutions of different media for reaching out to one's social network.

***Participation requires loading an Android app and about 10 minutes of time. To encourage people to participate, Northeastern will donate \$3 to One Fund Boston for every participant in the Boston study, and \$3 to local food banks in areas affected by Hurricane Sandy.***

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