

Public Administration, Emergency Management, and Disaster Policy

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Abstract

Public administrationists have been relatively slow to address the organizational issues in emergency management and the policy dilemmas resulting from the complex intergovernmental context of disaster policy and emergency management. A 1984 workshop helped develop a small community disaster researchers and they have provided much of the core of public administration disaster research over the past two decades. The events of September 11, 2001, however, have drawn many more public administrationists to disaster-related research, but the difficulty gaining access to Homeland Security offices and the lack of transparency in Homeland Security operations has created serious problems for those seeking to conduct rigorous research on organizational structures and processes.

While “[e]mergency management is the quintessential government role” (Waugh, 2000: 3), public administrationists have been slow to address the organizational and policy issues that define the role and the practice of emergency management. While the escalating social and economic costs of disasters since the 1980s, the “war on terrorism” since September 2001, and recent catastrophic disasters have certainly encouraged much greater attention to how we deal with natural and unnatural disasters, the number of public administration researchers involved in disaster policy and emergency management research is still relatively small in comparison to researchers in other social science disciplines. Public administration programs have also been slow to develop courses and curricula, but that gap is also closing as research funding increases and as colleges and universities develop research programs and centers focused on emergency management, Homeland Security, and related policy issues.

Catastrophic natural disasters in the 1960s and 1970s ultimately lead to the creation of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in 1979 and drew the

attention of some public administration researchers. To some extent the new agency became a focus of organizational and administrative study, drawing those interested in issues such as intergovernmental relations, federal-state-local fiscal relations, human resource management, executive leadership in emergencies, environmental planning, and organizational coordination. Perhaps to a greater extent, the policy problems engendered by major natural disasters became a focus of those interested in policy design, policy implementation, and policy and program evaluation. The watershed for public administration research in emergency management was a 1984 workshop sponsored by FEMA and the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration, that expanded the community of public administration researchers and the publication of a 1985 special issue of *Public Administration Review*, the preeminent journal in the discipline, on emergency management. Since that time, administrative imperatives, often driven by catastrophic events, have provided impetus for scholarship and encouraged the development of academic programs in emergency management and related professional fields. The events of September 11, 2001, energized and expanded that community of scholars and educators and the special issue of *Public Administration Review* (2002) published on the first anniversary of the attacks broadened the scope of public administration research to include issues of governance, civil liberties and privacy, and security, as well as organization. The special issue also addressed the policy implications of decisions made in the months following the attack for American democracy and the decisions yet to come, such as the creation of the Department of Homeland Security. Catastrophic events in 2004, principally the Indian Ocean or “Christmas” earthquake and tsunami and the four hurricanes that struck central Florida, have given the profession and

the field of emergency management even greater visibility and raised more questions about preparedness, especially alert and warning systems and evacuation, and social and economic recovery.

The need for public administration research in emergency management is clear. Beginning with Hurricane Hugo in 1989, the U.S. has had to deal with a lengthening series of billion dollar disasters and the effectiveness of government programs in managing risks to life and property has become a serious political issue on which the careers of elected and appointed officials have hung. The slow Hurricane Andrew response in 1992 could have cost President George H.W. Bush Florida's electoral votes and the lesson was not lost on President George W. Bush in 2004 when four hurricanes made landfall in Florida during his reelection bid. To avoid electoral loss, the Bush Administration orchestrated an extraordinary response in Florida to demonstrate the effectiveness of federal, as well as state, programs. Thousands were mobilized for the effort, including personnel from FEMA and other federal agencies, temporary employees hired specifically and rapidly for the response, and volunteers from other state emergency management and disaster relief organizations and from within the state of Florida. Indeed, the scale of the response was so great that other states and other communities might be disappointed if similar responses are not launched when they suffer catastrophic disaster. Dealing with such threats to life and property is perhaps the clearest indicator of government effectiveness and failing to address such threats may be construed as failing to govern responsibly.

The attacks on the U.S. in 2001 certainly raised questions about the effectiveness of government officials and programs and the resultant policy and organizational

challenges drew the attention of public administrationists. While hurricanes and earthquakes are “acts of God” and officials generally are not blamed for the destruction unless they fail to respond appropriately, officials are blamed when attacks occur “on their watch,” when they fail to protect their constituents. Consequently, there is increased political pressure to invest in prevention programs and to measure effectiveness in terms of the number of future attacks. There is also a tendency to cloak offices and programs in secrecy to assure that defenses are not compromised. Less transparency and openness means less access by public administration and other social science researchers, not to mention media representatives and the public at-large. With that lack of access, the critical examination that can improve organizational performance by challenging policy assumptions, developing good performance measures, and evaluating results is extremely difficult. Transparency and openness encourage trust and support, particularly when the research community has come to expect such access from public agencies. Nonetheless, despite the problems studying Homeland Security structures and processes, there are more public administrationists engaged in emergency management and disaster policy research, which may be result of both the growing interest in policy relevant research among funding agencies and the perception in the research community that there are serious organizational and policy problems that need to be addressed.

The attention to emergency management as an area of research interest among public administration researchers also reflects their current interests in organizational networks and the roles of nongovernmental organizations in delivering public services. The national emergency management networks are complex webs of public, nonprofit, and private organizations, as well as individual volunteers and ad hoc groups (see, e.g.,

May and Williams, 1986; Waugh, 2002, 2003). Communities rely upon community and faith-based organizations to help victims of disaster and to support emergency responders and the nation relies upon such groups in major disasters. There is a long tradition of volunteerism in American emergency management and that tradition is still very much alive in the fire service and in many emergency management offices. Most American communities still rely upon volunteer fire departments and many still rely upon volunteer or part-time emergency managers. Many emergency management offices have only a few hundred to a few thousand dollars a year or no public funding at all to spend on planning, communications, and other critical functions. Modern information technologies, even the automated office equipment that most of take for granted, are unavailable unless state or federal agencies provide funding or the emergency managers spend their own money. In short, the networks that deal with the nation's natural and technological hazards and respond when disasters occur are built upon an uneven foundation, some with cutting edge technologies and capabilities and some without even basic technologies and very limited capabilities. It is an organizational underpinning that may fail under the stress of catastrophic events. This is also the foundation upon which the nation's Homeland Security programs rest.

Public Administration and Emergency Management Education and Training

The number of Master of Public Administration and doctoral programs with specializations in emergency management, Homeland Security, and/or related fields is expanding steadily, likely as a result of increasing research dollars and growing student interest in the field since the 2001 attacks and, now, the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami and Florida hurricanes. There is a natural affinity between public

administration and emergency management largely because emergency managers plan, organize, manage human resources, lead, coordinate, review, and deal with budgets. Whether they work in the public, nonprofit, or private sector, their organizational responsibilities are critical to their disaster responsibilities. Indeed, most of their time is spent in managing human and financial resources and dealing with other officials and organizations. The discipline of public administration provides a foundation for emergency management educational programs and the discipline is increasingly associated with emergency management research. Of the twenty-nine institutions offering masters-level degrees, concentrations, and/or certificate programs in emergency management, nine are associated with public administration or public affairs programs (see FEMA, 2005). There is much less connection with undergraduate programs in emergency management because there are so few undergraduate public administration programs, but the graduate connection is direct and clear. A 2003 National Science Foundation-funded workshop on the skills and competencies necessary for emergency management identified almost all of the core competencies required in Masters of Public Administration programs, including an understanding of the social and political context, decision making, communication, leadership, analytical skills, budgeting, and human resource management (Thomas and Mileti, 2003: 6). What was not mentioned explicitly but was reflected in the inclusion of qualities like empathy was the *public service ethic*, the desire to respond to public needs or simply *to do good*. The connection is also recognized broadly in the field of emergency management. In order to be a Certified Emergency Manager (CEM®), the leading national credential for professional emergency managers, individuals have to have both general management and emergency

management training (IAEM, 2005). The management training may be in business administration or generic administration, but there is some expectation that it be appropriate to the organizational context of emergency management and that most often means the public sector.

Public Administration and Emergency Management Research

The main streams of public administration disaster research come from three sources primarily. Because it is an interdisciplinary field, the boundaries of the public administration disaster literature are very broad and overlap considerably with other disciplines, including, for example, political science, business administration, criminal justice, psychology, history, geography, medicine, civil engineering, and sociology. The literature ranges from the politics of environmental hazard regulation (see, e.g., Mittler, 1989; and Moore and Moore, 1989) to the management of terrorist threats (see, e.g., Waugh, 1984, 1990) to the psychology of evacuation (see, e.g., Riad, Waugh, and Norris, 2001). Research by public administrationists has generally been scattered within the larger social science literature, but that is changing as researchers find more outlets in mainstream journals.

Interest in disaster research among public administrationists was jumpstarted in 1984-1985 with the two-week FEMA/NASPAA workshop at the National Emergency Training Center (NETC) in Emmitsburg, MD, and the special issue of *Public Administration Review* on emergency management. Thirty-three public administration, political science, urban planning, engineering, geography, urban affairs, and criminal justice faculty were invited to the NETC to be educated about emergency management, to discuss the perspectives that their disciplines brought to the study of disasters, and to

review a draft of the special issue. Twenty-seven of the participants were from public administration/affairs or political science departments or programs. Some of the participants were contributors to the special issue but most were not. The issue was edited by William J. Petak, a public administration faculty member at the University of Southern California. Two of the articles were written by FEMA officials (i.e., public administrators), including Director Louis O. Giuffrida, and nine of the remaining nineteen articles were written wholly or in part by public administrationists or political scientists. Most of the other contributors were sociologists.

At the conclusion of the Emmitsburg workshop, a few of the participants pursued other interests. The workshop may have been their only foray into disaster research or emergency management. However, more than a dozen of the participants became very active in disaster research and helped found the American Society for Public Administration's Section on Emergency Management, which later merged with the Section on National Security and Defense Policy to become the Section on Emergency and Crisis Management.

Over the past two decades, that initial group of public administration scholars has produced dozens of books, chapters, articles, and research reports. They have also developed courses for FEMA's Higher Education Program. Conceptual frameworks have been developed, theories have been tested, and practice has been described, explained and evaluated. As is common with academic fields oriented toward practice, disaster research in public administration has evolved from single case studies to case analyses informed by theory to multivariate analyses. The methodologies of policy analysis, program evaluation, economic analysis, organizational analysis, network

analysis, organizational behavior, etc., have been brought to bear on disaster-related issues and phenomena. Disaster response, hazard mitigation (from building codes to flood control projects), preparedness (from planning to training to simulation), and, increasingly, recovery, as well as everything from the translation of the science of natural and technological hazards into policies to reduce risk to life and property to the management of volunteers and nonprofit disaster relief agencies have become foci of study. How knowledge concerning natural hazards and disasters can inform policymaking concerning the threat of terrorism and how to deal with terrorist incidences is a major theme in current research efforts.

Elsewhere in the discipline, budget scholars are trying to evaluate the funding of the new Department of Homeland Security and the impact of pass-throughs from federal agencies to local first responders through state offices. Human resource management specialists are trying to evaluate the implementation of the Department of Homeland Security's new personnel system and the impact of personnel turnover as older employees retire or seek more hospitable workplaces. Administrative law scholars are trying to examine the new processes adopted by federal, state, and local officials to pursue the "war on terrorism," from procurement practices to due process rights. There are fiscal and financial issues, human resource issues, organizational issues, intergovernmental issues, and every manner of administrative/political issues involved in emergency management and disaster research. Unfortunately, access to officials and information has severely limited research efforts and, as a result, programs and decision processes are not getting the scrutiny necessary to assure accountability and effectiveness. Nonetheless, the research that is being done is increasingly finding its way

into the major journals in the discipline. The visibility of the research discipline-wide, as opposed to only being read by specialists, will stimulate even more interest and encourage even more research.

Until recently, within public administration, emergency management and disaster research has tended to be viewed as “ambulance chasing” and, to the extent that the research was largely case studies, it was not a highly visible or respected pursuit among scholars. To some extent, that has been the perception of public administration itself among political scientists and other social scientists (Kettl, 2003) although public management research has become much more quantitative and theoretical in recent years. Public administration research on disasters and emergency management is still largely practice-oriented and too often not theory- or data-driven. But, public administration research on disasters and the practice of emergency management is also becoming more theoretical (see, e.g., Comfort, 1999; Busenberg, 2000; Kapucu, 2004) and more quantitative (see, e.g., Birkland, 1997), but case studies are still far more common than empirical analyses. Comparative analyses are also becoming more common (see, e.g., McEntire and Fuller, 2002; Waugh and Waugh, 2002) and the research community is increasingly international, involving noted scholars such as Dr. Akira Nakamura (Japan), Dr. Neil Britton (Japan), Dr. Alexander Kouzmin (Australia), and Dr. Uriel Rosenthal (The Netherlands), to mention but a few. For disaster policy and emergency management research to have credence in the discipline, it necessarily needs to become more empirical and theoretical. For that research to have credence in the profession, it needs to address practical issues and be presented in forms that professional emergency managers can use. That is, professional education in emergency management needs to include competencies

in quantitative analysis and research design so that emergency managers can be good users of the available research.

What is the Public Administration View of Hazards, Disasters, and Vulnerability?

The discipline of public administration focuses on policy problems and the management of public and nonprofit organizations. Increasingly, governmental action is through partnerships, networks, and contractual relationships (government services delivered by third parties – nonprofit organizations, private firms, or even other governments – through outsourcing, franchising, and other means). Public administrationists deal with a wide variety of societal risks, from health risks to occupational safety risks to financial risks to national security risks. Environmental hazards are dealt with on several levels – as community issues because most state governments have delegated authority for land-use planning and regulation to county or municipal governments, as state issues because of the potential economic impact of disasters, and national issues because the federal government generally has more resources to deal with environmental problems (although it has been less inclined to be proactive in recent years). Disasters are handled at the local level first and by state and federal agencies when local capacities are overwhelmed. Emergency management is necessary when emergency response involves multiple agencies, jurisdictions, or sectors or the scale of the emergency requires greater coordination. In short, emergency management is a logical focus of public administration research and a logical subject of public administration education because of its importance to society and its sociopolitical and economic context. It is a logical focus because emergency management is a central

government role and the effectiveness of programs is critical. It is also a logical focus because emergency management often involves intergovernmental, inter-sector, multi-organizational responses to situations and events that put lives and property at risk.

Emergency management is also related to policies such as sustainable development (see, e.g., McEntire, Fuller, Johnston, Weber, 2002). FEMA's Project Impact or Disaster Resistant Communities program encouraged the development of hazard mitigation strategies and the adoption of sustainable development practices. Planning for hazards was linked to development issues. Linking emergency management to the larger community environmental concerns can broaden its visibility and its political appeal. The link has been made very clear with the calls for sustainable assistance to encourage development that reduces the risk of future disasters in the coastal communities being rebuilt following the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami. Setbacks from the beach, alert and warning systems, and other measures are being encouraged to increase warning times and reduce structural damage.

What Are the Disaster-Related Issues in Public Administration?

To some extent, disasters also provide a context for the study of more traditional public administration issues. For example, among public personnel specialists, the design and implementation of the personnel system within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is a major focus. The DHS system is the extension of the Bush Administration's management/political agenda that predates the September 11th attacks and has driven policy changes in other federal departments and agencies. The Department of Homeland Security provides a new laboratory to see if removing traditional civil service protections from employees, instituting pay-for-performance

systems, and loosening controls on hiring result in higher productivity because of greater accountability or greater attrition because of political abuses of managerial discretion or simply because of decreased job security. Setting standards and performance goals are also critical activities in public agencies and the newly formed Department of Homeland Security should be providing lessons for other agencies. There is also growing interest in the funding of Homeland Security programs among public finance and budgeting specialists. Large budget increases and minimal control over expenditures with the Department of Homeland Security are more interesting than the marginal changes in the budgets of other agencies.

The major methodological challenges to doing disaster research, from the perspective of public administrationists, have been several. Studying organizations as they are engaged in dealing with crises has always been a problem. Critical processes need to be examined in the midst of the chaos if they are to be understood and managed more effectively. Organizational dynamics (e.g., adaptation, innovation, learning, etc.), decision making, leadership, communication, interpersonal relations, group dynamics, etc., are much different in the course of disaster than they are in the aftermath. This challenge is much the same as it is for scholars in other disciplines (see, e.g., Stallings, 2004).

For public administrationists, access to officials, offices, and program data is critical. Unfortunately, since the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, access has been a serious and growing problem. The transparency that characterized many public agencies prior to the September 11th attacks is being replaced by a preoccupation with security and distrustful views of the public and its right to

information. The openness that facilitated communication between agency and public is affecting agency effectiveness and public trust. The same holds true for researchers. Access that was easily gained prior to September 11th, 2001, and was still largely available during the World Trade Center response and in the early months following the attacks has effectively been cut off in most cases. Public administration researchers, even those within government agencies like the Government Accountability Office and the Congressional Research Service are finding it difficult to follow and evaluate the organizational changes that are accompanying the largest federal reorganization since the creation of the Department of Defense sixty some year ago. In short, public administration researchers are missing out on the most profound changes in the federal bureaucracy and the agencies themselves are missing out on the lessons that might be gleaned from current experience and are failing to benefit from historical experience.

What Are the Contributions that Public Administration Can Make to the Knowledge Base of Emergency Management?

Public administration research and educational programs could do much to dispel misconceptions about collective behavior in crises (i.e., the panic myth) and increase the effectiveness of emergency responders, emergency managers, and public officials by aiding in the design, implementation, operation, and evaluation of policies and programs to deal with hazards and disasters. The foci of public administration are effective and efficient policies and programs. Public administration research can help agencies become more efficient in the use of public and private resources and more effective in managing within complex networks of public, private, and nonprofit organizations and with volunteers.

As well as educating emergency managers, public administration programs can educate and, indeed, are educating other public administrators about emergency management. It is critical that mayors, governors, presidents, and other public and nonprofit officials understand the roles of emergency managers in order for them to support and facilitate those roles.

Lastly, the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA), the leading professional organization for public administrators and public administrationists, has guidelines for professional education that include knowledge of the American political system and its social, legal, and economic contexts. ASPA also has developed a code of ethics to guide public and nonprofit managers and leaders. The practice of emergency management and Homeland Security certainly presents ethical dilemmas that officials need to recognize and address. The profession of emergency management will be much stronger if it is built upon a solid foundation of knowledge, skills, and abilities and ethical standards.

Do the Contributions of Public Administration Overlap with Those of Other Fields of Study?

In some measure, sorting out the contributions of public administration from those of other fields is difficult largely because public administration is an interdisciplinary field. Disciplinary boundaries overlap. However, public administrationists have likely increased attention to the policy and organizational issues in disaster policymaking and emergency management practice. Clearly, sociologists, engineers, psychologists, geographers, and others involved in emergency management and disaster policy research are recognizing the need to provide policy- and program-relevant information as well.

But, those issues are the core interests of public administrationists.

What are the gaps in knowledge in public administration?

Disaster research in public administration, for the most part, has focused on organizational issues such as how well emergency management agencies have dealt with specific disasters, how decisions to issue presidential disaster declarations are made, how policies and programs are implemented and the effectiveness of policies and programs. Those and related foci reflect the more general interests of public administration researchers and, perhaps, the lack of knowledge of the wider disaster literature. The lack of knowledge may also be reflected in the persistence of some of the common myths that so infuriate disaster researchers, such as the myth of public panic in crises that still seems to exert powerful influence on policymakers. Those who connect public policies with social behavior, such as why people choose to evacuate or not or how people behave in emergencies, have fertile ground for policy studies.

What suggestions does public administration offer to improve emergency management?

Policy and program effectiveness is a consuming interest in public administration. Legions of scholars are engaged in developing performance measures and benchmarks. Modeling policies and programs and their impacts has evolved from simple univariate and multivariate arrangements to complex, dynamic systems models - even neural models - that capture the interactions among hundreds of variables. The question that remains is "what is effectiveness." In dealing with disasters, there is not always a clear test of programmatic impacts because of the variability in intensity of disasters and the low frequency of major disasters. In policy terms, how much investment in, say,

preparedness is enough (Waugh, 1999). The public administration literature does provide tools for program operation and policy design.

Recommendations for Public Administration and Other Disciplines

Public administration has two primary contributions to make to emergency managers and the disaster research community, as well as to their constituents. First, public administration's current focus on public management practices encourages attention to the efficiency and effectiveness of policies and programs. It is important that emergency management be done well. There should be accountability for policy making and program operations, guidance for effective allocations of human and financial resources, processes to evaluate programs and to correct problems, benchmarks for program performance, and so on. Public, nonprofit, and private emergency management organizations should be organized and operate effectively. All involved in emergency management, individuals and organizations, should also behave ethically. But, it is even more important that the focus of emergency management remain on doing good, not just doing it well (see, e.g., Waugh, 2004).

A positive effect of September 11th has been the focus on the potential impact of terrorism and related issues on American society among scholars, but the focus still tends to be very narrow. American society, including the government, should be a unit of analysis. An exception to the narrow research is Donald Kettl's (2004) work on Homeland Security's impact upon governance in the United States and on administrative processes in general. More attention to the impacts of disaster-related policy, including terrorism-related policy, on societal values, government processes, and economic

conditions is very much needed.

Second, greater access to policy and program data would permit examination of the effectiveness and efficiency of actions (and inactions) to deal with hazards and disasters. The Witt-era mantra of “one dollar spent for mitigation saves two dollars in recovery costs” needs to be affirmed (or not) with real data. While there is a risk of losing focus on effects or phenomena that cannot be easily quantified, there is great political advantage to having better cause-effect information. Also, the flexibility of counter-terrorism plans and programs to address natural and other man-made hazards and disasters, including the aftermath of terrorist attack, needs to be examined closely. Has the United States lost capacity to deal with common hazards and disasters in its rush to prevent terrorism? Indeed, are the prevention programs working? Are we safer? Is Homeland Security organized in a way that will facilitate effective action?

Third, disaster and emergency management research needs to be in the mainstream in the discipline of public administration, as well as in other social and behavioral sciences. Although more of the research is finding its way into the major public administration journals, most is still largely scattered in specialized disaster-related journals. Few public administrationists read the disaster journals and the same is likely true of sociologists, psychologists, and other social scientists. Greater exposure to the disaster literature would benefit the discipline of public administration, as well as the community of disaster scholars and educators.

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