

Heroes of the hour

The resilience of communities in emergency situations can be vital in limiting the damage and saving lives. So why are governments ignoring it, says **Frank Furedi**

CAUGHT up in a large-scale tragedy such as a terrorist attack or earthquake, most people lose their heads and panic. Disorder reigns and social responsibility breaks down. That, at least, is the view of many governments and emergency planners, who prepare for disasters presuming that people will throw rationality to the wind.

Both the UK's draft Civil Contingencies Bill, which aims to increase the government's powers to deal with major catastrophes, and the Homeland Security Act in the US, with its "command and control" model of dealing with terrorist attacks, discount any helpful contribution from the public. Instead, they rely on top-down approaches run by technocrats who are often far removed from the scene. The unspoken assumption is that when disaster strikes, ordinary people cannot be trusted.

They have got it very wrong. There is a large body of research, dating back to the second world war, which shows that far from panicking, people in the throes of a catastrophe behave quite rationally and with greater social responsibility than usual. Some of this work was reviewed last week at a conference at the University of Delaware to mark the 40th anniversary of its Disaster Research Center. DRC researchers have long questioned what they describe as the "disaster mythology". Now they fear this mythology is undermining how nations cope with emergencies.

One of the first people to look at how people behave in an emergency was Enrico Quarantelli, co-founder of the DRC. In a 1954 review of data he observed that the frequency with which people panicked in such situations had been exaggerated and that panic was "relatively uncommon". This is consistent with experience during the second world war.

Take the bombing of Hamburg by the Royal Air Force in July 1943. The raids killed between 30,000 and 45,000 people and left more than 900,000 homeless. Yet reports by the Hamburg

local authorities at the time stated that people responded in a remarkably orderly manner and quickly found shelter after the bombing, or offered it to others. Within five months the city's industrial production was back to 80 per cent of the level before the attack. The residents of Hiroshima were similarly cooperative and resilient after the US dropped the atomic bomb. Despite the fact that 75,000 people were killed out of a population of 245,000, within a few days essential services were restored and after a week economic life was back in full swing.

There are plenty more recent examples of how calm reigns over chaos. When the Chernobyl nuclear power station caught fire and released deadly radiation in 1986, the maintenance and emergency operatives at the plant did not panic and flee. Instead, many of them risked almost certain death to contain the damage and search for victims. When the first Scud missiles fell on Israel during the Gulf war of 1990-91, people suffered greater anxiety and used the healthcare services more than usual, but within a few days the levels of anxiety subsided as the public adapted.

Among the most analysed incidents ever in terms of crowd behaviour are the Al-Qaida terrorist attacks on the US on 11 September 2001. All the research indicates that people behaved in an orderly and socially responsible manner. A review by the US National Institute of Standards and Technology of 726 published eyewitness statements on the behaviour of the evacuees reveals that every injured or disabled person who was interviewed reported being helped to safety by a colleague.

The tragedy of the "disaster mythology" is that it tends to lead to government emergency programmes cutting ordinary people out of the picture on the assumption that they may be incapacitated by fear. Yet local people can be highly effective during emergencies and are often the first to respond. Certainly during floods,

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earthquakes and other natural disasters, they are generally at the forefront of search and rescue operations. This spontaneous provision of assistance can make all the difference; it can save lives and help restore essential services.

Emergency planners on both sides of the Atlantic appear to have overlooked this. The UK draft Civil Contingencies Bill totally ignores the role that local communities might play if disaster strikes. In the same way, the US Homeland Security Act puts the onus for survival on technocrats. Concerned by the prospect that citizens will respond irrationally, officials withhold from them "disturbing" information that could help them, and governments attempt to manage a disaster and its aftermath through bureaucracy and superior technology.

It is time they realised that community resilience is a hugely important factor in limiting the damage caused by a terrorist attack or other catastrophe. Recognising this will do more to protect society than billions of dollars spent on new technologies. ●

Frank Furedi is professor of sociology at the University of Kent, UK. His book *Therapy Culture: Cultivating vulnerability in an uncertain age* was published this year by Routledge

