



The 2008 American Preparedness Project: Why Parents May Not Heed Evacuation Orders & What Emergency Planners, Families and Schools Need to Know

**Annual Survey of the American Public by the
National Center for Disaster Preparedness,
Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health
and The Children's Health Fund**

Survey administered by the Marist College Institute for Public Opinion

Direct all correspondence to:

National Center for Disaster Preparedness
Columbia University, Mailman School of Public Health
215 West 125th Street, Suite 303
New York, NY 10032
(646) 845-2300
<http://www.ncdp.mailman.columbia.edu>

Authors

Irwin Redlener, M.D.

Director, National Center for Disaster Preparedness
Associate Dean, Mailman School of Public Health
President, The Children's Health Fund

Roy Grant

Director of Research, The Children's Health Fund

David Abramson, Ph.D., M.P.H.

Director of Research, National Center for Disaster Preparedness

Dennis Johnson

Director of Policy and Public Affairs, Mailman School of Public Health
Vice President of Policy, The Children's Health Fund

Introduction

Since 2002, the National Center for Disaster Preparedness (NCDP) at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health, and The Children's Health Fund (CHF), have conducted annual surveys of public attitudes and personal preparedness in the aftermath of the terror attacks of September 11, 2001. Produced in collaboration with the Marist College Institute for Public Opinion (MIPO), each is a random-dial telephone survey of approximately 1,300 - 1,500 adults stratified according to US Census 2000 data. Current and trend data from these surveys reveal a disjuncture between Americans' awareness and sensitivity to possible natural and man-made threats and their consistently low levels of personal preparedness.

Each survey, including the current, have included trended questions as well as "one-off" questions appropriate to the given time period. Trended questions ask about confidence in government; willingness and ability to evacuate; personal and family preparedness plans; personal sacrifice; community preparedness; and perceptions and engagement of all-hazard preparedness. All questions are cross-tabulated with a variety of demographic characteristics including race, age, gender, income, and region, size of community, political affiliation, and education. Further, select questions establishing a division of respondent (e.g. those having personal and family preparedness plans vs. those who do not) are cross-tabulated with other selected questions to observe correlations (e.g. awareness of community preparedness plans). The surveys are developed by NCDP and CHF investigators in conjunction with MIPO, who administers the survey, codes the data, and produces the frequency tables.

Full data and trend tables are available on request.

Summary

Despite the recent successful evacuation prior to Hurricane Gustav, concerns have been brought to light that may affect how officials organize the evacuation of population centers facing major disasters which strike without warning. Disasters "with warning," such as hurricanes, are generally predictable with a reasonable level of accuracy some days prior to the event. In contrast, disasters "without warning" present many more obstacles and substantially greater challenges for emergency planners. Examples of disasters without warning include earthquakes and large-scale terrorist attacks, such as coordinated bombings, widespread releases of chemical or biological agents, or a nuclear weapon detonation.

2008 survey data illustrate that in the event of an order to evacuate parents say they are overwhelmingly likely to disregard existing community emergency plans and instead attempt to pick up their children directly from school or day care instead of evacuating separately. Were this to occur in the immediate aftermath of a sudden disaster, chaos would ensue and public safety would be jeopardized.

Survey findings identify other obstacles to a timely and orderly evacuation, including lack of transportation. Despite years of federal and local government efforts to enhance personal preparedness, the majority of U.S. adults still do not have the most basic preparations in place for a potential evacuation. These findings strongly suggest that far more work needs to be done to prepare for an unexpected emergency situation.

Key Findings

- In the event of evacuation for a natural disaster with warning (such as a hurricane, flood or wildfire), **fewer than half of U.S. residents, 45%, are completely or mostly prepared with the things they will need for a safe evacuation**, such as personal medications, a family emergency plan, etc..
- **Only about the same proportion, 44%, have all or some of the basic elements of a disaster preparedness plan** (food, water, a flashlight with extra batteries, emergency phone numbers, and a meeting place in case of evacuation).
- **Nearly half of parents, 45%, do not know the location to which their child would be evacuated as part of their school's disaster plan.** This is despite the fact that 61% of parents say they are familiar with their school's plan.
- **Fewer than one-third of parents, 31%, would evacuate from their home or place of employment and reunite with their children later**, if so directed. By contrast, **63% would disregard an evacuation order and go directly to their child's school in an attempt to collect their children.** These findings are consistent for all regions of the country (east, central, south, and west) and regardless of household income or parents' education, age, or gender.
- Slightly over half of U.S. parents surveyed believed the school buildings in their community could withstand a major natural disaster such as an earthquake or tornado. **Even among those parents who trusted in the physical integrity of the school buildings, however, 61% would ignore evacuation orders and retrieve their children.**

Context: The Federal Investment in Disaster Preparedness

In its Fiscal Year 2006 budget, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) included \$3.6 billion “for grants, training, and technical assistance administered by the Office of State and Local Government Coordination and Preparedness...[to] support state and local agencies as they equip, train, exercise, and assess preparedness for emergencies regardless of scale or cause.”

The following fiscal year, 2007, an additional \$1.4 billion was spent to meet national preparedness goals. In addition, DHS undertook the *Ready* campaign, which it described as “one of the most successful campaigns in the Ad Council history,” with more than \$465 million in donated media support and more than 1.9 billion web site hits. Preparedness at the grassroots community level was expanded to reach nearly 70% of the nation’s population “to ensure that citizens are prepared and capable of handling disasters or threats of all kinds.”

Fiscal Year 2008 included a total of \$2.6 billion for disaster preparedness, of which most (\$1.9 billion) went to state and local government to increase security at the community level. These expenditures (detailed in DHS budget documents available on-line at <http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/>) were preceded by billions more, as detailed in a report by the Institute of Medicine who criticized the meager apportionment (4% of funding) for health care preparedness (*New York Times*, Editorial Desk, 2/22/07).

Consensus Among Major Health Organizations

There is consensus among the Institute of Medicine, American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), NCDP, and CHF that children’s issues are not adequately accommodated in disaster planning. It is clear from these new findings that appropriately addressing children’s needs

**Analysis of Evacuation Attitudes of Parents in the US
NCDP/CHF American Preparedness Project (Marist Poll), August 2008**

		US Parents with School-Aged Children (n=490, weighted)		
		If you were given an order to evacuate your home or place of employment during school hours, which ONE of the following are you most likely to do:		
		Evacuate as ordered and reunite with children later	Would ignore evacuation order and get children	Would wait and decide later
US Overall		31%	63%	4%
Q: Do you know where your child would be evacuated to as part of the school evacuation plan?	Yes (54%)	35%	63%	2%
	No (45%)	27%	67%	6%
Q: How familiar are you with the emergency or evacuation plan at your child's school?	Very familiar (29%)	38%	59%	3%
	Familiar (32%)	30%	68%	3%
	Not very familiar (20%)	24%	72%	4%
	Not familiar at all (19%)	31%	61%	9%
Q; Do you think the schools in your community were built to hold up in a major natural disaster?	Yes (52%)	34%	61%	5%
	No (40%)	27%	70%	3%
Q: Which statement best characterizes what you think might happen in a disaster situation?	Others will turn to you to lead the way (20%)	34%	60%	5%
	You will work on your own to protect yourself and your family (57%)	27%	67%	5%
	You will turn to someone else for leadership (10%)	41%	55%	0%
	You will wait for help to arrive (13%)	42%	51%	1%

Notes:

1. *Within each of the questions arrayed as horizontal rows, the underlying distribution is indicated in parentheses alongside the answer people provided. For example, when asked if they knew where their child would be evacuated to, 54% of parents said yes and 45% said no.*
2. *The percentages are illustrated as row percentages. For example, among parents who are familiar with their school's evacuation plan, 68% would ignore an evacuation order to retrieve their child.*
3. *Percentages may not add up to 100% because they do not include the categories of "unsure," "don't know," and "other."*

includes better understanding and accommodating the needs of their parents in times of emergency. In fact, the first of the AAP policy recommendations for disaster preparedness is to “minimize parent-child separation and implement systems for the timely and reliable reunification of families. (Online at <http://www.aap.org/advocacy/washing/DisasterPrep.pdf>).

These new data show that despite a huge federal investment in increasing local level disaster preparedness, this fundamental issue for children, maintaining family unification, has not been adequately addressed. This recommendation is solidly supported by these new survey findings, which reinforce the importance of a reunification plan as one of the tenets of family disaster preparedness. In terms of disaster preparedness policy, they also emphasize the larger need to plan with, rather than around, certain realities of human behavior.

The Bottom Line

Cumulatively, these data suggest that many people, particularly parents with children in school, may disregard specific evacuation orders and existing community emergency plans if they do not believe that they are in their family’s best interest. Many schools have existing disaster plans that coordinate the evacuation of its pupils en masse to a safe location, in an effort to avoid congestion and chaos at the facility during an emergency. However, parents and caregivers overwhelmingly seek to be reunited with their children immediately during a crisis.

Efforts by policy-makers, school officials, and emergency managers to counter this behavior, even if it is done with the intent of protecting the children, likely will not significantly influence what parental actions will be when a crisis occurs. A failure to resolve this planning issue suggests that both strategies for ensuring the safety of children- evacuating with the rest of the school and waiting for parental pickup- will be jeopardized.

Recommendations

The urge to go to their children will be a powerful motivator determining parental behavior during any large-scale emergency. While this is highly understandable, widespread disregard of emergency recommendations or orders, particularly with respect to area evacuation, could result in chaos and disruption of public safety and order during a critical event. Although, perfect compliance with evacuation orders will never be possible, there are steps that can be taken to mitigate these evacuation challenges and achieve maximum public compliance. The two recommendations below are based on an assumption that the more parents are confident in official plans to safeguard their children, the more likely they are to comply with disaster orders, including area evacuation:

1. It is imperative that all schools have well thought out disaster and evacuation plans that are clear, rehearsed, and coordinated with local emergency response officials.
2. Parents must be made fully aware of all relevant school emergency plans, including where children will be sent and for how long, along with detailed reunification plans. Extensive meetings and appropriate communications with parents will be needed to reassure them that plans are workable, their children will remain safe in an emergency and that reunification will be efficient, effective and timely.

Methods

The **2008 national survey** was conducted between July 25 and August 9, with 1,579 adults 18 years of age or older within the continental United States having been interviewed by telephone, including an oversample of 332 residents between the ages of 18 and 29. Households with children under the age of 18 were also a subset. Telephone numbers were selected based upon a complete list of telephone exchanges from throughout the nation. The exchanges were selected to ensure that each region in the country was represented in proportion to its population. The results of the survey are statistically significant at $\pm 2.5\%$. The results for adults age 18 to 29 and households with children are statistically significant at $\pm 5.4\%$ and $\pm 4\%$, respectively. The margin of error increases for cross-tabulations. Interviews were conducted in both English and Spanish.

Previous years' surveys employed similar methodology and sample sizes.

Institutional Information

National Center for Disaster Preparedness

NCDP is an academically based, inter-disciplinary center focused on the nation's capacity to prevent and respond to terrorism and major disasters. NCDP's areas of expertise include disaster preparedness and response, mental health treatment, pediatric issues, and the socio-political dimensions of terrorism. NCDP is a national and international leader in disaster and terrorism readiness providing direct services to individuals affected by September 11, public health training, and applied research. NCDP produces curriculum on bioterrorism, develops mental health programs, provides training for public health professionals and other first responders, develops model programs, and has a wide-ranging research and public policy agenda. NCDP has collaborative relationships with faculty from Columbia University's schools of nursing, medicine, dentistry, journalism, Teacher's College, School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA), and Union Theological Center as well with scholars at leading national and international universities, centers, and across all levels of city, state, and federal government

Mailman School of Public Health

The only accredited school of public health in New York City, and among the first in the nation, Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health provides instruction and research opportunities to more than 950 graduate students in pursuit of masters and doctoral degrees. Its students and more than 300 multi-disciplinary faculty engage in research and service in the city, nation, and around the world, concentrating on biostatistics, environmental health sciences, epidemiology, health policy and management, population and family health, and sociomedical sciences.

The Children's Health Fund

The Children's Health Fund, founded in 1987, is committed to providing health care to the nation's most medically underserved children through the development and support of innovative pediatric programs and the promotion of guaranteed access to appropriate health care for all children. To date, The Children's Health Fund's national network of 22 pediatric

programs has treated more than 350,000 children. For more information visit www.childrenshealthfund.org.

Marist College Institute for Public Opinion

Founded in 1978, the Marist Institute for Public Opinion (MIPO) is a survey research center at Marist College in Poughkeepsie, New York. The Marist Poll has conducted independent research on public priorities, elections, and a wide variety of issues including the economy, health care, foreign affairs, the environment, science, information technology, and lifestyles. Through the regular public release of Marist Poll surveys, MIPO has built a reputation of independence, reliability, and accuracy. Frequently cited by journalists, public officials, and policy experts, the Marist Poll has been recognized for fairness, accuracy, and timeliness. Its results are featured in print and electronic media throughout the world including The New York Times, The Washington Post, USA Today, The Wall Street Journal, and on radio and television news broadcasts. MIPO offers full service commissioned research for business, government, and nonprofits in all phases including study design, sample methodology, questionnaire construction, data collection, data analysis, report writing, and presentation. In all matters, MIPO, as a research organization, adheres to the current Code of the National Council on Public Polls and the Standards and Ethics of the Council of American Research Organizations (CASRO). MIPO also provides educational opportunities for students and is a public resource for information on survey methodology through internships, conferences, seminars, and coursework.