

SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN DISASTERS

DEVELOPED FROM *SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN DISASTERS: A PLANNING GUIDE FOR PREVENTION AND RESPONSE* BY ALISA KLEIN

After a disaster, people are more vulnerable to sexual victimization. The trauma of sexual violence can seriously hurt the mental, physical, and emotional well-being of a person.

This harm can be made worse by the added trauma of living through a disaster. For people who have already been through a major traumatic experience like sexual victimization, a disaster can open old wounds.

What do we know about sexual violence and disasters?

Basic resources that can protect people from sexual violence often aren't available after a disaster. Examples of these resources include safe housing, transportation, access to information, supportive friends and family, police protection, communication and health care. In already disadvantaged communities, a disaster can make these social structures even weaker. This chaos can make people from a disaster area more likely to be sexually victimized because:

- Living with many stressed people in crowded conditions can make sexual violence more likely to occur.
- People who have to flee their homes often have to live with strangers. There have been reports of evacuees being sexually victimized by members of the host family. Alternatively, members of the host family have experienced sexual violence by evacuees.

A **disaster** is any event that causes damage, disruption, brings harm to humans, or breaks down health or health services in such a way that an extraordinary response is needed from those outside the disaster area. This can include natural disasters like floods or tornadoes, disasters resulting from human mistakes or failures of technology such as toxic explosions or chemical spills, and disasters resulting from wars and other human conflicts.

- Police and ambulances may be less able to respond to sexual violence after a disaster because they are busy with other disaster response efforts. Barriers like flooded roads and fallen trees may block access to victims. As a result, criminals are less likely to get caught or punished.

Disasters often hurt groups that are already oppressed. People of color, women, children, elders, people living in poverty, and people with disabilities often have less protection from sexual violence.

These protections are even fewer in the wake of a disaster. It is important to consider the unique needs of vulnerable and oppressed groups when planning sexual violence prevention and response during disasters.



Disasters make it harder to report sexual violence.

Communities should expect delays in victim reports of sexual violence during and after a disaster.

- Victims of sexual violence may delay reporting or choose not to report because they are focusing on meeting basic survival needs.
- Hospitals and police stations may be shut down or overwhelmed by a disaster. Officials who would usually take reports of sexual assaults may be unavailable. They may be busy helping people meet basic needs. As a result, victims choosing to report an act of sexual victimization may be unable to do so.
- Advocacy organizations and communities should create a protocol for responding to courtesy reports of sexual violence. Police officers in areas where people are evacuated to should be prepared to take courtesy reports for victims from other jurisdictions.

How can sexual violence in disasters be prevented?

Before a disaster

- Organizations and communities can work together to design effective and compassionate responses and systems.
- Response strategies should be tailored to meet the needs of your particular community.
- Provide the public with information about emergency services and resources available to them.

During and after a disaster

- Cooperate across communities to meet basic

human needs in an organized manner with a focus on safety.

- Victim response agencies can develop plans to open their doors as quickly as possible.
- Establish systems that facilitate communication.
- Focus on establishing social stability.
- Provide safe and adequate housing and transportation services.

How can I help?

- Donate to the **Relief Fund for Sexual Assault Victims**. This fund was established to aid sexual assault victims and advocacy programs impacted by disasters. Find more information at <http://www.relieffundforsexualassaultvictims.org>.
- Consider volunteering in disaster relief efforts or at your local rape crisis center. Your state or territory coalition can help you identify a local rape crisis center that may need your assistance. Contact information for your coalitions are available at <http://www.nsvrc.org/organizations>.

Resources

Sexual Violence in Disasters: A Planning Guide for Prevention and Response, 2008, Alisa Klein, Louisiana Foundation Against Sexual Assault <http://www.nsvrc.org/publications/nsvrc-publications/sexual-violence-disasters-planning-guide-prevention-and-response>

La Violencia Sexual Durante Desastres: Guía de planificación para la prevención y respuesta, 2008, <http://www.nsvrc.org/publications/nsvrc-publications/la-violencia-sexual-durante-desastres-gu%C3%AD-de-planificaci%C3%B3n-para-la-p>

Preventing Violence After a Natural Disaster, 2006, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention <http://www.bt.cdc.gov/disasters/violence.asp>

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