

Chapter 11

Emergency Management Information System Support Rectifying First Responder Role Abandonment During Extreme Events

Keith T. Noble

Austin/Travis County EMS, USA

Connie White

University of Southern Mississippi, USA

Murray Turoff

New Jersey Institute of Technology, USA

ABSTRACT

Role abandonment once was considered unlikely by research scientists; however emergency management officials have experienced catastrophic events that counter prior assumptions. Event types such as deluges and pandemics surface as scenarios supporting one set of examples. The authors explore a different angle, focusing on individual practitioners including: (1) fire, (2) police and (3) emergency medical services. Surveys were taken by the various practitioner group types. Results suggested that there may be role abandonment issues, differing from one practitioner type to another, each with unique reasons given the event type. Although communities and individual emergency officials may never encounter such situations, it's imperative that this event type be taken into account during the design and implementation of disaster management systems. Systems developed should be designed to support and modify needs given the size and magnitude of the event, be it a routine emergency, a larger disaster or a 'once in a lifetime' catastrophic event. In this case, the authors focus on human resources. It is for this reason that the authors believe that algorithms be identified, developed and implemented so that such information be accessible to emergency officials, should this rare situation arise.

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INTRODUCTION

As simply pointed out by Quarantelli, “Disasters are different from catastrophies” (2000). Extreme events pose extraordinary response efforts and decision support requirements (Turoff, White and Plotnick, 2011). To what extent should emergency planners consider role abandonment during an extreme event? Hurricane Katrina was the first event in which there was large scale role abandonment by a group of first responders. The New Orleans Police Department (NOPD) had at least 200 Police Officers walk away from their posts or not respond after Hurricane Katrina (Treater, 2005). At the time of Hurricane Katrina, approximately 1,450 to 1,700 Police Officers were employed by the NOPD. Studies have explored many causes for this abandonment. Although there are many different schools of thought on the subject, the majority stated there were numerous problems within the department prior to Hurricane Katrina, which at the very least contributed to the role abandonment during Katrina. There were many issues in leadership, retention, and other areas prior to Hurricane Katrina within the department. Hurricane Katrina magnified these problems. “In the mid-90’s, the NOPD had a national reputation for both corruption and use of force by its officers. Between 1995 and 1998, NOPD terminated an average of slightly more than 18 officers per year and imposed an average of more than 100 suspensions per year” (Walker, Alpert, & Kenney, 2001). These numbers are significant for any organization.

New Orleans Fire and EMS Departments reported no role abandonment issues. The Journal of Emergency Medicine, reporting on a presentation given after Hurricane Katrina stated, “Despite the difficulties and chaos of the Katrina response, the speakers highlighted—to great fanfare from attendees—the fact that all New Orleans EMS personnel showed up for work, a remarkable achievement in light of the much-publicized defections in some other public safety agencies” (Jems.com, 2006). According to news reports there were numerous reports of New Orleans Police Officers abandoning their posts or not reporting for work. A non-exhaustive review of the literature did not find documentation supporting the same issue regarding the New Orleans Fire or EMS Departments.

There has been little research in comparing the three first responder groups of Police, Fire, and EMS. The main research documenting role abandonment has been on police departments, specifically, the NOPD during Hurricane Katrina. Hurricane Katrina was the most extreme event in regards to role abandonment in U.S. history. However, what we aim to answer is, was Hurricane Katrina an exception? If not, should such situations be further identified given they are rare. Along with other indicators that support role abandonment such as certain extreme events, be identifiable in emergency management information systems such that officials who have never experienced such situations, be privy to solutions and methods that aid in overcoming such deficiencies?

Police, Fire, and EMS personnel respond to incidents on all levels, from a simple vehicle accident to a terrorist attack like 9/11. They are defined as “emergency response providers” which “includes Federal, State, and local emergency public safety, law enforcement, emergency response, emergency medical (including hospital emergency service), and related personnel, agencies, and authorities” (Homeland Security Act of 2002, 2002). This study is a preliminary examination of the research question: During extreme events, is there a difference in the three first responder groups willingness to respond? If there is a significant difference between the three agencies in willingness to respond, what does that mean for the community?

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