NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

CENTER FOR CATASTROPHE PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE

Preparing For The Unthinkable: — A Report on the State of Citizen Preparedness

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Executive Summary

This report suggests that most Americans are unprepared for disasters, unaware of their local government's plans for response and recovery, and deeply confused about what to do in the event of an actual catastrophe such as the bombing of a local shopping center or supermarket or the release of a deadly disease or virus that spreads across their communities.

Hurricane Katrina revealed serious gaps in the nation's preparedness for catastrophe. Communications failed at all levels of the federal, state, and local system, while the catastrophe itself washed away essential sources of immediate aid. Many first responders evacuated in advance of the strike, while those who remained were surrounded by threats, both natural and human.

However, even if the New Orleans levees had remained intact, an immediate response would have been hindered by the enormous amount of debris that blocked access roads, and the collapse of communication, power, and sanitary systems in the hours immediately after Katrina hit. Residents would have been left to their own devices for days under the best of circumstances, but these were far from the best of circumstances.

While the federal, state, and local government could have, and should have done more in building a robust response system that can bend and flex with circumstances, Katrina's most important lesson may be that even the best laid plans are utterly worthless if citizens are not prepared to receive, understand and execute them. Indeed, Americans must be prepared to be on their own, without government assistance, for a period of several days following a catastrophe.

Unfortunately, we have failed to define specifically what Americans need to do to be prepared, and as a result many Americans have yet to heed the call to preparedness, as found in a summer 2005 telephone survey conducted on behalf of New York University's Organizational and Community Preparedness Project. To the contrary, many are generally uninformed about what they should do in the wake of a catastrophic event.

The survey also confirmed what images of the stranded poor in New Orleans following Hurricaine Katrina first suggested: less educated, lower income communities are least prepared for catastrophe, and least knowledgeable about where to turn for information and assistance in the event of a terrorist attack or natural disaster.

It becomes clear that the U.S. has spent an insufficient amount of time thinking about how to effectively communicate preparedness plans to the people they are intended to help.

Key Findings:

- Only one-fifth of Americans say they are familiar with their state government or city or town's plan for a terrorist attack.
- Most Americans lack confidence in local government's preparedness for terrorist attacks.
- Nearly one-third of Americans said they were unlikely to remain at their jobs if ordered to do so by government officials in the aftermath of a terrorist attack.
- A clear "preparedness divide" exists between high income, highly educated Americans and those with low income and a lower level of education.

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Introduction

The United States has spent billions over the past four years telling Americans to be prepared for disasters of any kind. Under the current "all-hazards" model, Americans are to be ready for everything from earthquakes to chemical attacks, electronic meltdowns to suicide bombers. Yet, despite the constant "not-if-but-when" warnings, the state of American preparedness is low.

This conclusion is based on a summer, 2005, telephone survey of 1,506 Americans, all selected at random through random-digit dialing. The forty-five-minute survey was conducted on behalf of the Organizational and Community Preparedness Project by Princeton Survey Research Associates from July 14-28, and was supported by New York University's Center for Catastrophe Preparedness and Response. The survey results have a margin of error of ± 3 percent, meaning that the answers for the entire sample of 1,506 Americans could vary by as much as 3 percent in either direction.

In a single sentence, the survey suggests that most Americans are unprepared for an actual event, unaware of their local government's plans for response and recovery, and deeply confused about what to do in the event of an actual catastrophe. The survey focused on how Americans would respond to two specific events: the bombing of a local shopping center or supermarket or the release of a deadly disease or virus that spreads across a community.

The survey suggests that Americans would head every which way but together in the wake of either of these two terrorist events—some say they would flee the scene, others would gather together in their homes, and still others simply do not know what to do. To the extent such scenarios resemble natural disasters such as tornados, toxic fires, and earthquakes, the reactions raise clear concerns about the need for further investment in strengthening individual preparedness and the local institutions on which they will clearly rely. Having been told to expect everything, many Americans may have concluded that they can prepare for nothing.

Not surprisingly perhaps, the vast majority of Americans believe their local governments, police, fire, and charitable organizations will be there to tell them what to do after a bombing or release of a deadly disease. They are much less confident that their local businesses are prepared to help, however, and know little about the actual plans their state and local governments would execute. Moreover, as Katrina suggests, this confidence in local institutions may be misplaced, particularly in the event that local institutions themselves evacuate or collapse in the wake of a major event.

Ironically, Americans are convinced that catastrophe is inevitable. The vast majority expect a major event to occur somewhere in the United States within the next five years. But many believe catastrophe will strike anywhere but in their own communities, and are therefore less motivated to prepare. They also report significant confusion about what to expect, how to prepare, and where to turn for help. They also report shortages in both time and money to prepare.

Much of this confusion is centered among lower-income, less-educated Americans—exactly the ones left behind as Hurricane Katrina approached the Gulf States. This "preparedness divide" between rich and poor, educated and less-educated presents a serious policy challenge as government, business, and charitable organizations look for ways to convince all Americans to prepare for the inevitable.

The survey provides information about four key issues related to the lack of American preparedness:

1) American predictions of terrorist attack,
2) individual preparedness and awareness ,
3) reactions to two scenarios of catastrophe, and
4) confidence in local institutions

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The Project on Organizational and Community Preparedness seeks to increase and sustain significant gains in governmental, nonprofit, educational, and private preparedness for potential terrorist attacks, including the use of weapons of mass destruction. Working closely with opinion leaders and executives across the sectors, the Project will create and disseminate best practices, standards, and measurement tools for increasing preparedness.

MAJOR FINDINGS

1. Predictions: Americans expect terror attacks, but not in their own communities

Americans' lack of preparedness does not stem from naiveté. They are convinced that future terrorist attacks are coming, and soon.

- Seven out of ten (69 percent) say that a terrorist bombing at a local shopping center or grocery store is very or somewhat likely somewhere in the United States within the next year, and half (53) say that the release of a deadly disease or virus is very or somewhat likely in the next year.

The probabilities increase when respondents are given a longer time frame.

- Four fifths (83 percent) and believe a bombing is very or somewhat likely in the next five years, while nearly three quarters (73 percent) say the release of a deadly virus is also very or somewhat likely somewhere in the United States in the next five years.

Despite these relatively high probabilities, most Americans do not believe such an attack in likely in their own communities. Only a quarter (26 and 24 percent respectively) say a bombing or release of deadly disease is very or somewhat likely in their own community in the next year, while roughly a third (36 and 34 percent respectively) say such attacks are very or somewhat likely in the next five years.

Asked why such attacks are unlikely in their own communities, approximately a third say government and new security measures will prevent such attacks, between a sixth and fifth say that their community is not a good target for such attacks, and slightly more than a tenth a tenth say that terrorism is less of a threat in the U.S. today. In addition, nearly a fifth believe that terrorists cannot accomplish an attack using a deadly disease or virus.

Table 1 shows the reasoning:

Not surprisingly, the predictions of future attack at home vary with the size of community in which respondents live. Most Americans may agree that a future attack is likely somewhere, but those who live in large cities are much more likely to say that it will happen in their areas.

Thus, 37 and 28 percent respectively of urban respondents believe that a bombing or release of a deadly disease is very or somewhat likely in the place where they live in the next year, while 43 and 38 percent believe it is very or somewhat likely in the next five years. In contrast, only 12 and 16 percent of rural respondents believe such attacks are likely in the next year, and 22 and 28 percent in the next five

TABLE 1: REASONS WHY AMERICANS PERCIEVE A TERRORIST ATTACK AS UNLIKELY

Results only include respondents who said an attack was either not too likely or not likely at all

	Bombing	Disease or Virus
U.S. government will prevent the attacks	22%	18%
Terrorists are weaker or less of a threat today	13	12
Security measures will prevent an attack	11	13
Attack is too hard to accomplish	3	18
Community is too small, not a good or high value target	13	21
Other	17	17
Don't know/Refused	19	0
N=158 for bombing, 312 for disease or virus		

years. Americans from rural areas are the most likely to say their communities do not provide an attractive target for a terrorist, even though they may be well within the air currents of a biological attack.

Americans who live in suburbs tend to side with their urban neighbors in making predictions: 27 and 25 percent believe that a bombing or release of a deadly disease is very or somewhat likely in the place where they live in the next year, while 37 and 35 percent see such attacks within five years.

2. Preparedness: Most Americans lack necessary supplies and information

Regardless of their predictions, Americans are not convinced that the nation is well prepared for actual attacks. Only 16 percent say that the nation is very well prepared for a bombing at a local shopping center or grocery store, while just 8 percent say the same about the release of a deadly virus or disease.

Even though exactly two thirds said they paid a great deal or fair amount of attention to news about preparing for terrorist or information distributed by their local organizations or the federal government, Americans are also doubtful about their own preparedness:

- Asked to think back to before September 11th, 44 percent say their households are either much more prepared (17 percent) or somewhat more prepared (27 percent) for emergencies of any kind, while 54 percent say their level of household preparedness remains about the same (50 percent) or somewhat less or much less.
- Asked specifically about their current state of preparedness, just 10 percent answer that they are very prepared, another 43 percent say somewhat prepared, and the rest, 46 percent answer that they are not too prepared (24 percent), not prepared at all (22 percent), or just did not know (1 percent).

Given a list of possible explanations for their lack of greater preparedness, half agree that they wish they had more time (53 percent) or money (53 percent) to focus on preparedness, half (49 percent) agree they are not sure exactly where to turn for help, nearly two-thirds (65 percent) agree they wish they were more organized, and nearly four out of five (78 percent) agree they are not sure what to expect. Only 18 percent agree that greater preparedness is unnecessary. 23 percent agree they do not want to think about September 11th.

As for awareness of what their local institutions might want them to do, only a fifth (20 and 21 percent respectively) say they are familiar with either their state government or city or town's plan for a terrorist attack. However, almost half, 46 percent, say they are familiar with their workplace's plans, and 47 percent of parents with children aged say there are familiar with their local school's plan. In addition, two thirds say they pay a great deal or fair amount of attention to news stories or information distributed by the organizations in their local community or the federal government on how to prepare for a terrorist attack.

When these three questions about (1) familiarity with state plans, (2) familiarity with local plans, and (3) attention to the news are combined, the lack of general awareness becomes even more troubling:

- 27 percent of Americans showed no awareness to any of the three source of information.
- 48 percent showed awareness to only one of the three sources of information.
- 16 percent showed some awareness to at least two of the sources.
- And just 10 percent showed some awareness to all three.

It is also important to note that the workplace and school plans may not involve anything more than closing shop and picking up

the children. What is clear is that most Americans do not know what their governments want them to do next.

Moreover, even though the vast majority has enough bottled water in their house to last for three or four days (63 percent), and canned goods (90 percent), only 37 percent have a plan with family or friends about who everyone would contact in the event of a terrorist attack.

When these three questions about the elements of basic preparedness are combined, the public's lack of general preparedness is also clear:

- 7 percent had none of the three elements of preparedness.
- 25 percent had just one of the three elements.
- 39 percent had two of the three elements.
- And just 29 percent had all three.

3. Reactions: Different disasters elicit and require different responses

Americans have very different instincts in responding to actual attack. Asked to imagine that terrorists had exploded a bomb in a local shopping center or grocery store near them, a sixth of Americans say their first reaction would be to make contact with their family and friends in some way, another sixth would volunteer to provide help in some way, a sixth would gather their family and stay at home, a seventh would seek further information, just over a tenth would flee the community, 3 percent would pray, and a final sixth simply do not know what they would do.

Asked to imagine that terrorists had released a deadly virus or disease that was spreading rapidly across their community, almost a third would gather their family and stay put, a seventh would make contact with family and friends in some way, another seventh would seek further information, just under a tenth would flee the community, 6 percent would pray, and just over a fifth say they simply do not know what they would do.

Reactions to the two scenarios are summarized in Table 2.

The table clearly shows that reactions vary with the event at hand. Whereas a sixth of Americans would volunteer to help after a bombing, only 2 percent would volunteer during the spread of a virus or disease. At the same time, whereas nearly a third would gather their family and stay put during the spread of a virus or disease, only a sixth would do the same after a bombing. It is easy, it appears, to be civic-minded when a bombing occurs somewhere in the community, but not when a disease or virus is spreading rapidly across a community. There is a time to offer aid, and a time to gather one's family and supplies.

TABLE 2: FIRST REACTIONS TO CATASTROPHIC EVENTS

	Bombing	Disease or Virus
Contact family and friends	17%	13%
Learn more about the event	13	14
Gather family and collect supplies	16	30
Volunteer to help	16	2
Flee the community	11	8
Pray	3	4
Other	7	6
Don't Know/Refused	16	22

N=1506

The reactions suggest that disaster planners must accept the obvious possibility that Americans will react in different ways to different catastrophes. Indeed, the survey suggests that Americans simply will not follow orders. After a bombing, first responders would have to handle a surge in volunteers, but after the release of a disease or virus, they would have to reach a population with a very high percentage who had locked themselves in.

The reactions also suggest that there is a very high concentration of confusion among a small, but significant sample of Americans. The fact that between one-sixth and one-fifth of Americans had no response at all when asked an open-ended question about the first thing they would do in a crisis suggests serious challenges translating abstract emergency plans into plain instructions that ordinary Americans can both understand and internalize. As we shall see below, the confusion is concentrated among the same Americans who did not know what to do as Katrina approached.

More importantly perhaps, the survey suggests that the call to home may be the most powerful pull against the best laid evacuation plans. Asked if they would stay at work if their local government leaders told them to stay put, just 48 and 49 percent respectively of employed respondents said it was very likely that they would follow the order after a bombing or release of a disease or virus, while 29 and 30 percent said that following the order was not too likely or not likely at all.

Not surprisingly perhaps, Americans of all educational, income, and racial backgrounds would turn almost immediately to the media for information on both the nature of the catastrophe and what to do.

- Almost two thirds (64 and 65 percent respectively) would turn to television for information in the event of a terrorist bombing or release of a deadly disease or virus, while a sixth (18 and 16 percent respectively) would turn to radio. Only 3 and 4 percent respectively would look to government itself.
- Asked where they would turn for information second, Americans would turn to radio next (40 and 42 percent), the internet (15 percent each), friends and family (10 and 8 percent), compared with just 4 and 5 percent looking to government. If these information sources fail, as television and the internet did with the power-outages in New Orleans, battery-powered radios are the only obvious option, and should be considered part of the preparedness package in any home.

4. Confidence: Most lack confidence in local government's emergency preparedness and response

Americans have reasonably high levels of confidence in at least four of the five local institutions they might turn to in the event of an actual catastrophe. Asked how prepared their local government, police, fire, charitable organizations, and businesses are to help those who need assistance after a bombing or release of a deadly disease or virus, Americans ranked their institutions as follows:

- 52 percent believe local charities such as the Red Cross, Salvation Army and hospitals are very prepared for a terrorist bombing, while 36 percent say the same about a deadly disease or virus.
- 51 percent believe their local fire departments are very prepared for a terrorist bombing, while 32 percent say the same about a deadly disease or virus.
- 38 percent believe their local police departments are very prepared for a terrorist bombing, while 22 percent say the same about a deadly disease or virus.
- 30 percent believe their local governments are very prepared for a terrorist bombing, while 19 percent say the same about a deadly disease or virus.

• 20 percent say their local businesses are very prepared for a terrorist bombing, while 13 percent say the same about a deadly disease or virus.

Awareness of an institution's plans does not build confidence, or vice versa. Among respondents who said they were familiar with their city or town's plan for a terrorist attack, for example, just 41 percent said their local government would be very prepared to assist people who needed help after a terrorist bombing, while just 30 percent of those who were familiar with their own workplace's plans also said local businesses were very well prepared for a terrorist bombing. Although one cannot assume that these respondents were thinking about their own governments and employers when they answered the confidence questions, the answers suggest an important disconnect between knowing about a plan and believing in the institution that produces it.

Having watched closely as Hurricane Katrina unfolded, it is not clear how Americans will react to messages from their local institutions in the wake of future disasters. Much as one might hope they will heed the evacuation orders more quickly, confidence in government and its leaders was badly shaken by the widely-televised images of evacuees who followed orders only to be stranded at the New Orleans Superdome and Convention Center. Only time will tell what the impact of Katrina will be on public reactions to future catastrophe.

Nevertheless, there are hints in the survey. Asked why their local institutions were not well prepared, most respondents gave the benefit of the doubt to their institutions. Thus, just 11 and 12 percent respectively said local charities were to blame for their inability to be very prepared, compared with 13 and 12 percent for local fire, 20 and 16 percent for local police, and 20 and 16 percent for local businesses. The rest simply said that it is nearly impossible to be very prepared for the two events.

Of the five institutions (local government, fire, police, charities, and businesses), respondents were the least forgiving toward local government. Among respondents who said local governments were not very prepared for the two catastrophes, 25 and 26 percent respectively said it was the local government's fault. Table 3 shows how this relatively small percentage of respondents explained the problem with their local governments.

TABLE 3: REASONS FOR THE LACK OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT PREPAREDNESS

Percentages only include respondents who said their local governments were not very prepared and said local governments were at fault for the lack of preparedness:

Explanation	Bombing	Disease or Virus
Local government is too disorganized or mismanaged to adequately prepare	69%	76%
Local government lacks the employees and money to adequately prepare	49	65
Local government has not made dealing with this kind of attack a top priority	63	59
Leaders of local government are not concerned about being prepared	54	49

N=121 for bombing, 142 for disease or virus

THE PREPAREDNESS DIVIDE

These survey results should give pause to every disaster planner in the United States, no matter what disaster they worry about. The survey suggests that most Americans are not able to withstand long periods on their own, nor prepared for thoughtful, unified response to a relatively small-scale disaster such as a terrorist bombing or a large-scale disaster such as the release of a deadly disease or virus. The best laid plans are utterly worthless unless the public either knows about the plans in advance or can tune into the right channel during and after a disaster. In a very real sense, the U.S. has been spending too much time planning without thinking about actual execution, and the barriers therein.

Even more importantly, the survey reveals a "preparedness divide" between the rich and poor, educated and less educated that must be remedied if organizations and communities are to act in concert. Socioeconomic status has a profound impact in explaining many of the findings described above:

- Less educated, lower income Americans are much less likely to say they are prepared for a terrorist attack. Just concentrating on education, which is highly correlated with income, 28 percent of Americans with a high school degree or less say they are not prepared at all for such an attack, compared with 16 percent of those with a college degree or more, while 42 percent say they do not have enough bottled water to last three or four days, compared with 33 percent of those with a college degree or more.
- Less educated, lower income Americans are more likely to report problems getting the resources to be prepared. 57 percent of those with a high school degree or less say they strongly or somewhat agree that they are not sure exactly where to turn for help, compared with 39 percent of those with a college degree or more. In turn, 64 and 62 percent respectively of those with a high school degree or less say they wish they had more time and money to focus on preparing, compared with just 41 and 39 percent of those with a college education or more.
- Less educated, lower income Americans are equally likely to not know their state government or city or town's plan for a terrorist attack, but are less likely to know about their workplace's plan. Thus, 58 percent of those with a high school education or less said they did not know about their workplace's plan, compared with 43 percent of those with a college education or more.
- Less educated, lower income Americans are less likely to have any ideas whatsoever about what they will do in the event of an actual event. Thus, 19 and 29 percent respectively of those with a high school education or less answered "don't know" when asked what they would do first in the event of a terrorist bombing or the release of a deadly disease or virus, compared to 11 and 15 percent of those with a college education or more. In contrast, 23 and 21 percent respectively of those with a college degree or more said they would make contact with family and friends in the event of a bombing or release, compared with just 14 and 9 percent of those with a high school degree or less.
- Less educated, lower income Americans are somewhat less likely to have confidence in all but the fire department to assist people in need. Thus, 11 and 20 percent respectively of those with a high school education or less said the police were not at all prepared to help in the event of a bombing or release, compared with 4 and 11 percent of those with a college education or more.

This preparedness divide is particularly important in explaining the confusion surrounding the evacuation of New Orleans. It is also closely correlated with race. However, fur-

ther statistical analysis of the survey suggests that education and income, not race, explains the general findings outlined above.

There are other demographic differences embedded in the survey. Women are less likely to see terrorist attacks in the immediate future, more likely to agree that they do not know what to expect from an emergency, and more likely to know their school's plans for an attack, while younger Americans have more confidence in local institutions and say they are more prepared for a terrorist attack.

As noted, the preparedness divide is firmly rooted in socioeconomic class, and will not close without concerted efforts to target messages more thoughtfully into less educated, lower income communities, while working to restore confidence in the institutions that have so much to say when catastrophe strikes.

This conclusion is supported in further statistical analysis of the key predictors of preparedness. In order, the top predictors of an individual's preparedness are as follows:

1. Whether an individual is aware of the state government's plan, the city or town's plan, and follows the news or information about preparedness—being aware absolutely matters to the level of preparedness
2. Whether an individual believes that he or she knows where to turn for help in an emergency—confusion about who is in charge reduces preparedness
3. Whether an individual lives in a household with high income and education—those with the least resources are the least prepared.

Age, race, gender, and political party have no significant bearing on preparedness.

CONCLUSION

At least by their own opinions, Americans believe the state of preparedness is low. Many have made improvements over the past four years, and would like to do more, but confusion reigns, as does the natural human sense that tragedy will strike elsewhere. Improving the state of American preparedness will take much more than yet another round of public service announcements warning of impending disaster.

To the contrary, Americans appear to be longing for more nuanced information on what to do in different circumstances. When should they flee? When should they stay put? What can they do to protect themselves from harm? Despite the preparedness divide, Americans appear ready to learn more about the differences between threats.

Much as disaster planners worry that more information will somehow paralyze the public, the paralysis can hardly be worse than suggested by this survey. By letting Americans in on the secret that different hazards require different responses, planners will not only reaffirm most American's commonsense beliefs, and might actually build confidence in their plans when disaster strikes.

Color-coded alerts are of little value if they do not carry enough specificity to counter the chaos revealed in the first instincts of poorly informed Americans. The same can be said of calls for backpacks full of water and canned goods that should never be carried from home, or duct tape and plastic sheeting. Americans appear ready for an honest conversation about what they can and should do to be prepared, and the risks from inaction. It is up to local and national institutions to initiate the conversation.

CCPR BACKGROUND

In response to the events of September 11, 2001, Congress and the Department of Homeland Security provided New York University with federal funding to develop a university-wide, cross-disciplinary center to improve preparedness and response capabilities to terrorist threats and catastrophic events.

Drawing on each of its fourteen schools, NYU formed the Center for Catastrophe Preparedness and Response (CCPR) and initiated research projects that address issues including public health preparedness, legal issues relating to security, first-responder trauma response, and private sector preparedness.

NYU CCPR works in close partnership with the Department of Homeland Security, its Office for Domestic Preparedness, the New York City Police Department, the Fire Department of the City of New York, and the New York City Office of Emergency Management.

For more information, please visit www.nyu.edu/ccpr

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