

A Rapid Assessment of Disaster Preparedness Needs and Resources during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: Background: This year has seen the emergence of two major crises, a significant increase in the frequency and severity of hurricanes and the COVID-19 pandemic. However, little is known as to how each of these two events have impacted the other. A rapid qualitative assessment was conducted to determine the impact of the pandemic on preparedness and response to natural disasters and the impact of past experiences with natural disasters in responding to the pandemic. Methods: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 26 representatives of 24 different community-based programs in southern Louisiana. Data were analyzed using procedures embedded in the Rapid Assessment Procedure-Informed Community Ethnography methodology, using techniques of immersion and crystallization and focused thematic analysis. Results: The pandemic has impacted the form and function of disaster preparedness, making it harder to plan for evacuations in the event of a hurricane. Specific concerns included being able to see people in person, providing food and other resources to residents who shelter in place, finding volunteers to assist in food distribution and other forms of disaster response, competing for funds to support disaster-related activities, developing new support infrastructures, and focusing on equity in disaster preparedness. However, several strengths based on disaster preparedness experience and capabilities were identified, including providing a framework for how to respond and adapt to COVID and integration of COVID response with their normal disaster preparedness activities. Conclusions: Although prior experience has enabled community-based organizations to respond to the pandemic, the pandemic is also creating new challenges to preparing for and responding to natural disasters.