

Commentary on “A Study of Emergency Medical Service Personnel and Law Enforcement Official Willingness to Respond to Disasters”

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Abstract

In every disaster scenario, emergency responders face tremendous uncertainty and risk that would influence their willingness to respond (WTR). Hence, it is important to gain better understanding of psychological root causes for emergency responders to abandon their roles and, in turn, to develop better disaster response strategies. Our recent study has shown that the overall WTR of Louisiana EMS and LEO personnel is 69.9%. In addition, emergency responders' WTR decreased as perceived threat increased. The statistically significant influences on WTR were fear of working an unfamiliar role, concern for family, self-safety, feeling well-prepared to respond, duty to colleagues, and increasing the frequency of training.

Keywords: Role abandonment; Willingness to respond; Disaster response

Description

During 2020, the spread of COVID-19 pandemic and its resulting impact has led to one of the worst global crises. In the medical field, COVID-19 has challenged the capacity of hospitals and intensive care units worldwide and taken a heavy toll on healthcare workers. Healthcare workers have relentlessly provided care for patients despite personal risk of infection, fear of transmission to family members, and physical as well as mental exhaustion. This raises questions on whether the medical responders are able to respond to their duty and even more important, how willing they are to respond to work when they know the risk of facing potentially fatal situation. Emergency management officials could no longer assume that they would have a full complement of emergency responders when disaster strikes.

An emergency responder is typically able to cope with managing their multiple roles as an emergency responder, family member, and individual under normal circumstances. Disasters increase the stress experienced by emergency responders including balancing personal and family safety, as well as duty to their family, profession, and colleagues. As disaster induced stress increases, the strain on their respective roles leads to role

conflict. In Louisiana, Hurricane Katrina in 2005 has become a watershed moment in disaster response research when 250 (16%) members of the New Orleans Police Department abandoned their posts, failed to report to work, or walked off the job in the chaos of the Hurricane's aftermath [1]. The issues faced by the Law Enforcement Officials (LEO) in New Orleans transcend emergency responder roles and disaster types still today, including concerns for self, family, property, the duty to perform and support colleagues, as well as the complexity of influences tugging at an emergency responder in a disaster. Our recent study entitled “A Study of Emergency Medical Service Personnel and Law Enforcement Official Willingness to Respond to Disasters” presents the method and results of a perception study of LEO and Emergency Medical Services (EMS) in Louisiana. This research is timely and relevant as it was performed in south Louisiana, the epicenter of category 4 Hurricane Laura and a COVID-19 hot spot in the US.

This study took a deep look into the WTR of emergency responders in Louisiana and their WTR to a full spectrum of natural, conventional, and unconventional disasters. It highlights the fact that responders' WTR heavily depends on the perceived threat of specific disaster event. Different types of event possess different levels of perceived severity and susceptibility. These two components pose as the perceived threat to the responders. Hence, they are less likely to be willing to respond to those events with a higher perceived threat to themselves, their families, or their properties. Furthermore, the study showed that certain demographics, characteristic traits, barriers, facilitators, and incentives influence WTR. Information gathered for this type of study can be used proactively in identifying desirable characteristic traits in hiring emergency response personnel, or proactively addressing the potential barriers, facilitators, and incentives to disaster response in advance of a disaster to help mitigate role abandonment [2].

Conclusion

Role abandonment likely occurs in every emergency responder. Level of perceived threat and safety concern for self and family are the major barriers that reduce their WTR. Increase in frequency of training, cross training, and well-prepared disaster response plan could be effective mean to improve WTR. While developing a common risk level matrix to

cover several disaster types may be a worthwhile academic endeavor requiring further research, the standardization of risk across all disasters may lead to an oversimplification of the challenges facing disaster responders. Finally, there is a need for future research focusing on the implementation of strategies to mitigate role abandonment. Lean Six Sigma (LSS) problem solving methodology might be an effective mean to address the problem of WTR. No existing literature was found on the use of these methods in emergency or disaster response; however, application of LSS tools have been found to be effective in the

public sector including public hospitals, higher education, local government, and police services.

References

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