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RESPONSE TO SEVERE WINTER AND BLIZZARD CONDITIONS IN GRUNDY AND BUCHANAN COUNTY, VIRGINIA, IN 1996: A FOCUS GROUP ANALYSIS

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RESPONSE TO SEVERE WINTER AND BLIZZARD

CONDITIONS IN GRUNDY AND BUCHANAN COUNTY, VIRGINIA, IN 1996: A FOCUS GROUP ANALYSIS

ABSTRACT

This is the first of what is to be several reports of a study of the response, by people living in the town of Grundy and Buchanan County, Virginia, to severe winter and blizzard conditions in 1996. It was an especially attractive place to conduct research, as it is far from the main stream of primary media attention. Its citizens have to do more for themselves; and they expect to be more self-reliant than those with more ready access to helping agencies and media publicity. The focus group technique was used to interview subjects who were: 1) volunteer and paid emergency workers, 2) persons in positions of authority in the area, 3 members of the national guard (conference call), 4) communication workers, and 5) hospital workers. Among the several themes that emerged from the interviews were pride in the community, a desire for common training of all emergency workers, and self-confidence in their ability to deal with adverse conditions. There were strong opinions about technical matters such as the kinds of equipment that should be used in such situations. These and other themes will be explored in future papers.

INTRODUCTION

This is a report of the first phases of a study of response to the blizzard conditions by people living in Buchanan County, Virginia, during the winter of 1995 - 1996. It is intended to add further to the body of knowledge about how people respond to some of the difficulties associated with winter blizzard conditions. The research question as stated in our proposal to the Natural Hazards Research and Applications Information Center was ". . . to examine the problem of how people help one another in dealing with the problems created by blizzards. We are especially interested in the coping behavior which takes place during the peak intensity of the storm, when it is impossible or almost impossible to move about."

Blizzards make a significant contribution to the losses caused by natural hazards in the United States (Cornell, 1979: 244-246; Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 1978: 145-150; Hewitt and Burton, 1997: 1-8; White and Haas, 1975: 83). The urbanized northeast (Hewitt and Burton, 1971:,7-10) and the Midwest (Lemons, 1957) are especially vulnerable parts of the United States. The losses caused by blizzards come through the blockage of movement and the stranding of people; the breakdown of public utilities such as communication, electricity, and heat; medical problems such as childbirth and heart attacks, and the inability to obtain necessary medical care among those stranded; inability to obtain food and other sources of sustenance,1~; exposure to prolonged isolation and cold; and many other factors.

THE SETTING

The research setting for the study was Buchanan County, Virginia. Its county seat, Grundy, and other local communities are located in southwestern Virginia, bordered by West Virginia on the northeast, the Virginia counties of Dickenson on the west, Russell and Tazewell on the south, and the state of Kentucky on the north. The county was founded in 1858 and named in honor of James Buchanan, president of the United States from 1857-1861. It is part of the Appalachian Plateau and has an area of 508 square miles, 86% of which is in forest. It is almost entirely mountainous. Human settlement is mostly confined to the stream and river valleys, as the steep mountain sides make construction extremely difficult.

The earliest settlers were farmers. By 1880 logging had become the primary industry to be replaced in the 1920s by

coal. Today coal and the production of coke are the main products and industries of the region. More coal is produced in Buchanan County than in any other county in Virginia - about 46% of the total. There is very little commercial agricultural production, but community leaders hope that reclaimed land from the strip mines will provide opportunities for certain kinds of intensive agriculture (see Erikson, 1976, for a general description of life in this region).

Grundy, the seat of Buchanan County, is the primary center of public and private services. Public education is provided through eleven elementary schools, one middle school and one junior high school, and five high schools. Six church-affiliated schools also provide education K-12, and the Mountain Mission School founded in 1921, a school and home for orphaned children of all ages also provides education K-12. Southwest Virginia College, opened in 1968, in neighboring Tazewell county provides bus transportation from Buchanan county to its campus. The Buchanan Public Library is housed in a modern facility and provides local, bookmobile, conference room, and other services to the community.

Two hospitals in Grundy each have over a 100-bed capacity. There is a new county health department, and an active system of outreach services through emergency medical services, social work agencies, fire and police agencies. Some of these are private for-profit operations and others are volunteer groups and public agencies.

The population of Buchanan is highly homogenous. It is predominately Caucasian and Protestant with over 100 churches. Members of minority groups make up less than 5% of the total population. Grundy and Buchanan County form a community that provides the basic services and amenities of life. An active business and community leadership is committed to growth and development. They have developed a plan to diversify the economy, increase educational opportunities, and reduce the strong dependence on coal.

Grundy was an especially attractive place to conduct this research for several reasons. It is located on the far edge of the vast facilities of the urban concentrations. It is out of the mainstream of primary media attention (Dymon and Boscoe, 1996). While not denied help from various outside agencies, it is more dependent upon its own resources, even though its problems are not less severe. It provides an opportunity to observe how people cope with severe conditions when they are on the periphery of major activity. They have to do more for themselves; they expect to be, and are, highly self-reliant.

Also the area is threatened by a number of potential disasters that strike from time to time and serve to insure or maintain a relatively high state of readiness. In addition to the snow hazard discussed below, Grundy and Buchanan County have to deal with floods, landslides, and mine accidents.

On April 4, 1977, for example, Grundy had a very severe flood, when the Levisa River rose over thirty feet and its feeder streams were also very high. The flood took several lives and caused over \$100 million in damages. Hundreds of homes, mobile homes, roads, bridges, buildings, and businesses were destroyed or severely damaged (Coleman, 1977). Coal mining too takes a toll through occasional disasters and illnesses such as black lung disease.

THE HAZARD

The winter of 1995-1996 was one of the most severe, especially in the eastern states of the United States, in many years. There were repeated snow storms beginning in December and continuing through March. There were problems with extremely low and unusual temperatures, an enormous amount of snow, and widespread flooding primarily caused by melting snow (*The Blade*, February 21, 1996; McFadden, January 21, 1996; McFadden, January 22, 1996; McFadden, February 4, 1996). These conditions provided an excellent opportunity to study and collect data about the problem in which we were interested.

The people of Grundy and Buchanan County suffered a prolonged impact from extreme cold and blizzard conditions during January and February 1996. There was a heavy snowfall of 18 to 31 inches over Buchanan County during the weekend of January 6. The county supervisors declared a state of emergency on Sunday morning, and soon after Virginia became a federal disaster area, making it eligible for federal funds for snow removal, etc. After that there were

many more snow storms. (St. Clair, January 11, 1996; St. Clair, January 18, 1996).

Many persons were caught short and were in need of food, shelter, and alternative heat sources, medical supplies, and treatment. There were also problems with electricity, fallen trees, roads, and water service - all affected by the storm which "virtually paralyzed much of the county" (St. Clair, January 18, 1996).

The National Guard was called out. Members of the Guard distributed food, fuel, oxygen, medicine, heaters and other necessary items to those in need. They also transported those in "dire straights" to emergency shelters.

METHODOLOGY

The focus group technique and format was used to interview the respondents (Krueger, 1988). Each of the five groups of respondents were told that:

This project should lead to a better understanding of the process of giving and receiving help during blizzards. The emphasis on behavior during impact should be especially useful as it has received relatively little research attention. Furthermore it has a clear practical aspect in that it may contribute to better preparation for dealing with the problem of physical and social isolates in blizzard conditions.

The respondents were asked the following questions:

1. How did the winter actually develop into a problem?
2. How did people cope with and survive the winter?
3. Who gave help?
4. Who got help?
5. How was information about the winter conditions communicated to those who required and needed it?

In each of the five interviews the members of the research group introduced themselves, described the study and its sponsorship, asked for cooperation from the respondents, and requested permission to make a tape recording of the session. Everyone granted permission and the respondents were interested and cooperative. The interviews lasted from an hour and a half to two hours and were held in the conference room of the Buchanan County Library on March 14 and 15, 1966.

THE RESPONDENTS

Information about the impending arrival of our study group was circulated by Patricia Hatfield, Head Librarian of the Buchanan County Library. She requested volunteers from groups of people who had been directly involved in dealing with problems created by the blizzard conditions. Five groups of people volunteered to participate in the study. They were: 1) volunteer and paid emergency service workers, 2) people in positions of authority including the sheriff, etc., 3) active duty members of the National Guard unit that participated, 4) communication workers - TV head, Pat Hatfield, St. Clair, and 5) hospital workers.

The participants might best be described as a "sample of convenience" rather than as a random sample. We believe that the results will be highly suggestive and significant in their own right and useful as a source for further research.

FINDINGS

The data are not yet ready for final analysis. However, during the course of the interviews, several interesting themes emerged. One of the most important was that the respondents showed a high level of competence and devotion to their

work. They also expressed high pride in their community and its way of life along with its altruism and solidarity. They insisted, for example that all victims were treated alike. They felt that they were doing something worthwhile, performing a valuable service. And while all took the situation very seriously, many enjoyed showing and testing their ability against the challenge of the powerful wintry conditions. The contributions of many persons and groups were recognized by name in the Virginia Mountaineer (St. Clair, January 18, 1996). At the same time there were some problems. Some people who, by virtue of their employment positions with the city or county, should have worked to alleviate the disaster conditions did not. Their failure to respond to the emergency was pointed out in the Virginia Mountaineer, but their names were not mentioned.

There were also "good" and "bad" victims. The vast majority of the victims, in the view of the respondents, reacted very well to the situation. They did not complain or whine, did not take unneeded help, and often deferred to others by asking rescue workers to first help someone else in greater need than themselves.

The "bad" victims were those who took or requested unneeded items or more of what they already had (food), complained a great deal, demanded immediate attention, and displayed similar behaviors. For example, the county distributed a great many small kerosene-fueled heaters to persons who had lost their source of heat. The heaters were to be returned and stored for the next period of need. Most, but not all, of the heaters were returned. It was considered very bad form to keep the heaters.

Several interesting technical and social themes emerged in the focus groups. For example, there are several groups that provided emergency service in the same area. Some of these are for-profit and others work on a non-profit basis. Sometimes several of these groups responded to the same call for help/assistance. This is known as "call jumping" and the hope was expressed that something could be done to stop it.

For the most part the respondents were pleased and satisfied with their training. Sometimes people engaged in the same activity had received somewhat different training. This led to a strongly stated wish for common training, where possible.

There was widespread agreement that the four-wheel drive vehicle was the best machine for search, rescue, and helping operations. The humvee was also highly praised by several respondents, one of whom said with admiration that it "would climb a tree." The four-wheel drive was considered especially effective in dealing with steep slopes. There was little interest in the snowmobile, which has been used effectively in other situations

CONCLUSIONS

Because we believe that the results will be highly suggestive and significant in their own right and useful as a source for further research, it is planned to explore (present and publish) these and other themes as the data are taken from tape to paper.

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