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Organization and Tasks  
in Disaster

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POLICE DEPARTMENTS  
ORGANIZATION AND TASKS IN DISASTER

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Police departments vary according to the size of the city they serve and are influenced by local tradition and problems. The typical municipal police department will be the basic concern here.

There are several ways in which the organization of a police department can be viewed. Three different patterns of organization will be considered here and discussed individually. First the department is organized around time since the demands made upon it vary in different time periods. Second, the department is organized around function. Third, the department is organized in terms of authority.

Time

Police departments are organized around a 24-hour day. Certain personnel may work at particular hours because of high demands at those times. Being organized on a 24-hour basis gives the police department certain advantages in coping with demands. A 24-hour work day means that the department normally has available more potential manpower than would an organization which works only one or two shifts. Many departments have standing orders that, in certain types of emergencies, all personnel will present themselves for assignment. In other instances, departments have routine orders to recall the previous shift, as well as contact the next shift to report early. In a short time, a department can have from two to three times the number of personnel it ordinarily uses. These personnel resources are the major means of adapting to the increased demands made by disaster tasks. Often officers will come in to work voluntarily, which can cause the problem of individuals working steadily for sixteen hours and then reporting for their regular shift, though not formally requested to do so by the department. This possible problem is alleviated by the formal extension and rearrangement of shifts to cover periods of peak activity.

Another effect of time on response of the organization is the time of day that a disaster agent strikes. This affects not only the manpower available at the moment but also the ability and means of calling in manpower. For example, if the disaster strikes at 3:00 a.m. the number of communication outlets for recalling personnel is reduced. At this hour, the number of people reporting in spontaneously would be lower than if the emergency had occurred in the early evening hours when radios and television sets are on. Manpower mobilization can be delayed or facilitated due to the number of effective communication channels available at different disaster-impact times.

Function

The various functions performed by a police department are the primary basis for organizing the activities of a department. The functions of a modern police department are usually grouped into three major areas:

1. Line or "operations": patrol, traffic, detective, vice, and juvenile.

2. Services: records and communication, laboratory, jail, and maintenance.
3. Administration: planning, inspection, budget and accounts, personnel, public relations, and intelligence.

Larger departments often have divisions separated along the lines of various functions such as vice control division, patrol division, traffic division, and so on. A general patrol force in a smaller department may handle crime repression and vice control as well as traffic control and investigation. Auxiliary services, such as keeping records may be handled by a records supervisor and a secretary in a smaller department.

In a disaster situation, there is often a reallocation of personnel. Since most disaster tasks involve field activities, men will be taken from divisions such as record keeping, detective, and juvenile, and used in field situations. A skeleton patrol may be assigned to areas where there is usually a high rate of patrol activity and no crew at all in areas of usual low activity.

#### Authority

The third basis of organization centers on levels of authority. Police departments are traditionally modeled on authority patterns drawn from military organizations, and military titles are typically used. Such an authority model suggests that decisions are made at the top and transmitted down the line and that the close supervision of personnel is common. In actual operation, however, three factors seem to minimize the rigidity of the model. First, in some departments, as in one midwest department DRC studied, there is a conscious attempt to give lower echelon personnel a degree of autonomy. Second, the nature of most police work, particularly patrol activities, militates against close personnel supervision. In the everyday operations of basic police work -- field patrol and traffic duties as well as in many investigation activities -- the patrolman makes most of the decisions on his own, with the general orientation and regulations of the department to provide his frame of reference. The patrolman, sometimes in conjunction with his peers, is the primary decision maker in large part because he is isolated most of the time from his superiors. Third, the crucial nature of communication in modern police departments tends to undercut traditional lines of authority. A centralized system of communications allows those in communications headquarters some discretion in making assignments and in offering advice. Those in the communications headquarters are usually not high in the authority structure of the department. In particular, the role of the dispatcher seems to be critical. The dispatcher takes complaint calls and assigns the patrol cars. Communications officers usually are not high ranking. Compared to the hierarchical authority model, orders and assignments are initiated far down in the authority structure and not at the top.

This discussion of the organization of the police department around the factors of time, function, and authority is important in its implications for disaster functioning. The timing of a disaster event and its relation to

peak or slack periods of mobilization of the police department obviously affects its ability to accomplish tasks early in the emergency period. Also, disaster activities affect certain functional units more than others. Some divisions of the typical department are immediately and directly involved while others play a more supportive role. Organization in terms of authority also has its implications. If a department has a rigid authority structure, the diffuse nature of disaster events creates conditions which would make decision making difficult, if not impossible. On the other hand, if the patrolman is normally encouraged to act with a degree of autonomy in the context of rules, this pattern of authority may be more easily adapted to actual disaster conditions.

#### Disaster Tasks

The police department normally is seen as the organization to be called upon if any difficulties arise. In disasters, it is not only one of the first organizations on the scene, but the one which tends to symbolize the authority of the community. Its involvement in disaster activities is based on its predisaster orientation to preserving life and property. Under certain disaster conditions, it also becomes involved in many other activities, beyond the protection of property and traffic control, which fulfill the basic but vague purpose of service to the community. The tasks usually performed by the police in disaster activities can be viewed in terms of their similarities to the normal tasks of the police.

Traffic and crowd control. These disaster tasks follow closely the usual control functions of the police prior to disaster impact. Since there is convergence of men and materials on the impact area, this area is usually cordoned off, traffic is usually diverted around the area, and entry to the area is restricted to those who have specific assignments there.

Protection of life and property. Certain continuing hazards may be created by the impact, such as broken fuel lines, or property may be exposed to further destruction. The exposed property may be placed under guard and threats to the property corrected or minimized.

Search and rescue. Police often find injured victims and initiate medical attention for them. In instances of widespread damage, they may become involved in a systematic search effort for possible victims.

Warning and evacuation. A community may have some warning time before certain disaster agents such as tornadoes and hurricanes become manifest. In these cases, police often become involved in traffic control and the provision of transportation and security measures involved in such movement.

In each of these four major categories of tasks performed by the police in disaster activities, there are particular problematic aspects. Some of the tasks which seem similar to the normal operations of the department become more complicated in the disaster context. Some difficulties are created by mobilization for problems which never develop. Other difficulties develop as a result of the increased scope of community involvement and the resulting

new interorganizational relationships. Sometimes difficulties are created by the attempt to control a situation which is perhaps impossible to control. In each of the four major task categories, there are rather persistent difficulties which will be indicated below.

#### Traffic and Crowd Control

In a localized disaster where the impact zone is delimited, the area is usually cordoned off in some fashion, often with perimeter guards. After a perimeter guard has been established, there are certain requirements necessary to develop an adequate system of control -- a pass system which determines that an individual has a right to enter. This necessitates information about the situation and knowledge about organizations, their involvement, and their personnel, and in turn, requires coordination and communication among various organizations.

The major point to be made here is that the development of an efficient pass system is predicated on some type of "legitimizing" of decision making. This seldom exists in the early hours of the emergency period when it is most needed.

The problematic nature of the pass system introduces a touch of irony. Questions still could be raised as to the necessity for a pass system. Much of the motivation seems to come from the fear that individuals who enter the impact area will engage in antisocial behavior, a fear which is largely misplaced. The most realistic problem that the police face is not security but traffic control. The preoccupation with security in fact often diverts resources from the development of effective traffic control since manpower inevitably becomes involved in the less essential security tasks.

#### Protection of Life and Property

Because of their early entry into the impact zone, police seek out hazards. In some instances they may have to make a decision concerning the safety of certain areas and then evacuate them or prevent access until repairs are made. In addition, the police often are the source of notification to those organizations which can initiate repairs.

There is invariably a great concern about the possibility of looting. Public officials expect these types of community emergencies to result in problems of protection. The dimensions of the problem anticipated often lead these officials to request additional law enforcement units. This fear is often translated into the development of perimeter guards and other security measures. Frequently, the emphasis of initial reports emanating from a disaster area is on the fear of looting and on the steps taken to prevent it. Actual looting is rare in communities subsequent to natural disaster impact. The Disaster Research Center at Ohio State University, in its field studies of more than forty disasters both in the United States and abroad, has found extremely few verified cases of looting (Dynes and Quarantelli, 1968). Actual police records support these findings. Nevertheless, the belief

that looting will be widespread has important consequences for the police. This belief leads to the commitments of police personnel to prevent such behavior. Again, such personnel might be more effectively used in realistic disaster tasks, such as traffic and crowd control. However, if the police did not take such security measures, they would be severely criticized by other community officials who also have similar expectations concerning what should happen. It is a paradox, then, that there is a major deployment of police in disasters related to almost nonexistent problems while other realistic tasks may not be attended to because of the lack of manpower.

#### Search-and-Rescue Activities

One of the tasks not usually well organized subsequent to disaster impact is search and rescue. The lack of organization is a result of several factors. First, the task can be overwhelming if there are a large number of casualties. Communities may be prepared to handle small periodic emergencies but lack the routine equipment and personnel to handle large numbers of casualties. Second, the need for search and rescue occurs immediately after impact when all organizations are involved in problems of mobilization and coordination of resources, and when lack of information is the greatest. Also, this period is characterized by anxiety over the possibilities of saving lives and avoiding further injury. Finally, the task is likely to be uncoordinated since it is seldom that any one specific community organization assumes responsibility in this activity.

Particularly in the first part of the emergency period, search and rescue is typically unorganized and individualized, involving primarily those uninjured in the impact area aided by incoming organizational personnel, including policemen. The commitment of personnel to such isolated and often geographically diffuse tasks creates added problems of communication and control for the department. While a patrolman becomes involved, he may be away from radio communication and cannot accept other assignments which may reflect other priorities. When skilled nonpolice personnel who can assume search-and-rescue tasks enter the area, police officials often order their patrolmen to leave these initial tasks and to concentrate on other tasks for which the department has clearer organizational responsibility. The reallocation of personnel may be difficult because of communication problems, because of the continued commitments of specific policemen and, sometimes, because of the individual patrolman's reluctance to accept other tasks which seem less important to him.

#### Warning and Evacuation

The police department is usually one of the first organizations to learn of an impending threat or of the impact of a particular disaster agent through its routine monitoring of the community and its environment. Because of their superior capabilities for communication, police departments often become the key link in the warning process. This creates special problems for them and, in turn, forces them into close relationships with other organizations within the community.

With these key assets, the policemen often come to see their organization as the key agency in disaster response. While this image is in large part correct, this "centrality" sometimes results in a reluctance to keep other community agencies informed since the role these other organizations play in a community emergency may be seen as secondary by the police. But, particularly in the warning process, failure to pass on information can affect the operations of almost every other community emergency organization.

In addition to the problems of coordination, there is the problem of the mobilization of resources, particularly manpower, within the police department itself. The previously mentioned reallocation of personnel (from areas of less immediate concern) may present major problems for the department. At some point, presumably, the record keeping and investigatory activities, for example, will have to be done, which will mean a backlog, and extra hours of work and expense for those departments. Those who would normally work in the field within certain divisions, such as a patrol division, know each other, know the field procedures, and know the field commanders. This is seldom the case with men from other divisions, exacerbating the problems of chain of command and communication that occur. There may also be problems with equipment, such as cars with radios tuned to different frequencies. In addition, if the request for men from other departments continues for a long time, the commanders of the depleted divisions may become reticent in the "loaning" of men. The normal climate of the department in terms of competitiveness among divisions and its overall size will govern the extent to which problems of the type mentioned above may occur.

Other sources of personnel for police disaster activities are auxiliary police. Auxiliaries are more widely used in some regions than others; 76% of the departments in the mid-Atlantic states, 77% of the Pacific region departments, and 79% of the departments in New England have auxiliaries. Overall, 62% of the cities with a population over 10,000 have these types of reserves (International City Managers Association, 1966). Other sources of personnel -- police-like organizations such as the National Guard, and other police departments in the area, such as county sheriffs and state troopers -- are usually not available, at least formally, until some time after the impact. Formal agreements must be made to secure such help and to assure their having full police powers within the jurisdiction involved in the disaster. The scope of this problem depends, in part, on the extent of prior interorganizational disaster planning, and formal and informal agreements that have been made relating to procedures in situations requiring the cooperation of an outside organization. The National Guard represents the greatest delay because of the need for mobilization and extracommunity approval. A number of coordination problems may occur between these groups and the department, particularly in communication and lines of authority. Problems of communication may evolve from the use of different radio frequencies and differential knowledge of the area. Particularly in suburban areas, jurisdictional disputes may occasionally arise between police and county sheriff departments.

Many of these difficulties can be alleviated by careful planning for disaster. Plans, and, more importantly, familiarity with the implementation of them, seem to lead to better use of organizational resources in the first hours after the disaster impact. This is perhaps even more relevant in the case of the police department because its operation is more dependent on its

own existing resources. In addition to planning, previous experiences with disaster operations also provide a context of familiarity with such events that reduces the tendency to operate randomly. Thus, there seems to be an increasing awareness of the need for emergency planning and training and a greater ability and interest in learning from the experiences of other departments. Since 1965, various types of disturbances around the United States have increased the awareness of the importance of special planning and training, particularly in matters of communication and maintenance of lines of authority.

#### References

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## THE DISASTER RESEARCH CENTER

The Disaster Research Center was established at The Ohio State University in 1963. The Center is engaged in a variety of sociological research studies on the reactions of groups and organizations in community-wide emergencies, particularly natural disasters. Since its inception, over 200 different field studies have been carried out. The major research focus of the Center is on emergency organizations and their disaster planning and responses to large scale community crises. Center personnel are also conducting special studies on such things as the legal aspects of natural disasters, cross-cultural responses to national catastrophes, the emergence of new groups during periods of stress, and other topics. The research is intended to provide basic knowledge about group behavior and social life as well as information which can be used to develop more effective plans for future emergencies.

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