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of more terrorist attacks prompted legislation that has limited the civil rights of all Americans. The attacks have also been introduced into the immigration debate, providing anti-immigration forces with an argument that immigrants, and particularly those in the country illegally, pose a threat to national security and that further measures should be taken to secure the borders. Thus, the impact of disasters can ripple far beyond the immediate initial event.

The Unexpected Nature of Disasters

On October 29, 2012, hurricane Sandy made landfall on the eastern seaboard, and left in its wake damage and destruction affecting 650,000 residential homes, more than 300,000 businesses, and left more than 9 million people without electricity. Over the next several days, the entire eastern coast was impacted and at a standstill—more than 20,000 flights were cancelled. Overall, Sandy caused $68 billion in economic losses (Aon Benfield, 2013).

On April 27, 2011, more than a hundred tornadoes hit the states of Alabama, Mississippi, and Georgia, leaving behind severe destruction and the loss of over 300 lives. "It happened so fast it was unbelievable," said Jerry Stewart, 63, a retired firefighter. "They said the storm was in Tuscaloosa and it would be here in 15 minutes. And before I knew it, it was here" (Roney & Pesce, 2011). Often natural disasters hit with very little warning, and impact those who are most vulnerable.

On March 11, 2011, a devastating 9.0 earthquake triggered a tsunami that killed over 12,000 people and washed away entire towns on the northern seacoast of Japan. The 30-foot-high wall of water damaged the Fukushima nuclear power plant, resulting in a radiation leak. Tens of thousands of people living within a 100-mile radius of the plant had to be evacuated. Some towns may never be safe for people to return home to. The Japanese military, the international Red Cross, and the Salvation Army were among the first responders. Patrick Fuller of the International Federation Red Cross (IFRC) helped rescuers at the disaster zone and described the scene as "destruction on a scale I've never seen before" (Roberts, 2011, p. 1). It is estimated that the quake caused over $250 billion in damage to property. This is the worst crisis to hit Japan since the atomic bomb attacks during World War II. The Japan quake disaster and response offer many lessons about catastrophic disaster preparedness. The United States needs to build a culture of preparedness that includes more self-reliant communities. Many towns and communities were cut off from help for days. Each community needs to have local resources to help residents during the initial days of a natural disaster (Carafano, 2011).

The impact of natural disasters lasts years, even decades. Such is the case for many people from New Orleans. Hurricane Katrina came ashore on August 29, 2005. It ripped through the Gulf coasts of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, creating the largest natural disaster in US history. The storm was responsible for the deaths of 1,836 people, and it caused over $80 billion worth of damage. It also resulted in the dislocation of more than a million people from their homes and the separation of family members and social networks. Many thousands of people lost their homes and all of their belongings. They

were relocated to other cities and states into temporary housing, where many are still living three years later. Hundreds of thousands of people left their lives, family, friends, and jobs to live in states all over the country, often where they knew no one and where the culture was quite different from what they were used to. The suffering caused by the storm was magnified by an inadequate government response to the disaster. Charges have been levied by many that the government response was both slow and inadequate because most of those affected were African American and low-income people. Three years after the storm hit, the devastation was still evident. Much needed aid had not materialized. Many neighborhoods in New Orleans remained uninhabitable, particularly those that had been home to low-income and African American residents. More than half of the residents of Louisiana and Mississippi who were affected by the storm continued to experience significant mental health problems for years (Abramson, Stehling-Ariza, Garfield, & Redlener, 2008). The impact of disasters of this magnitude continues to touch citizens for years to come.

The storm exposed vast racial and class differences. A study by the Kaiser Family Foundation conducted in New Orleans a year after the storm found large disparities along racial lines. Fifty-nine percent of African American respondents, as opposed to only 29 percent of white respondents, stated that their lives were still disrupted. Larger numbers of African American residents reported continuing financial and housing difficulties. Seventy-two percent of African Americans reported storm-related health care problems, while only 32 percent of white residents reported health-related concerns (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2007). As noted earlier, rebuilding in low-income and primarily African American parts of New Orleans has been particularly slow, even after 10 years (Rivlin, 2016).


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Social workers were effective in advocating for the most marginalized citizens who were displaced after the New Orleans disaster. These people faced multiple barriers after the disaster, including finding safe, affordable housing and living-wage jobs (Pyles, 2008). The key to effective intervention was to help survivors deal with the psychological fallout and then to organize grassroots efforts by the citizens to press for change. Social workers were also involved in developing policies (e.g., about housing) and utilizing the local political process to get them implemented (see Box 14.4).


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Box 14.4 Becoming a Change Agent

Although it is clear that Hurricane Katrina represented an immense natural disaster, some people argue that it is also a human-made disaster. Scientists and nonscientists have suggested that increasingly frequent and strong hurricanes may be the result of human-made climate change. Those who support this belief point to the fact that four hurricanes hit Florida in 2004, something that had never happened before. That same year, 10 cyclones or typhoons hit Japan. The previous record was six in one season. Two studies found a roughly 80 percent increase in powerful cyclones and hurricanes over the past 35 years (Kerr, 2005). One study published in the journal *Science* found that a compilation of available data supported the contention that human activity is likely affecting hurricane intensity but that the current available data are not clear of the effect on the number of storms (Trenberth, 2005). Other scientists argue that we do not yet have the data to know whether human activity is contributing to either the number

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