

Treating Social Problems as Emergencies

FROM *When Social Problems Are Treated as Emergencies*

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What is an emergency? Since this word is used all the time, its meaning is often taken for granted. In this selection, the authors touch on a variety of issues—including homelessness, hunger, and violence against women—in order to illustrate how claimsmakers frame social problems as emergencies and the implications this framing has for policymaking. The authors highlight the political and popular reasons why the emergency frame carries so much influence, as well as how it can divert attention from important alternative ways of framing problems.

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There are many reasons why public officials might favor treating recent social problems as emergencies, including the straightforward desire to put helpful programs in place quickly. But the long-run consequences are not so straightforward. They include at least temporarily deflecting attention from more deeply probing solutions, substantially surrendering control over admission to client rolls, and a degree of inequity in policy delivery.

The two major social welfare problems that have captured public attention in the 1980s, hunger and homelessness, share distinctive features. They are partly manifestations of the gap between incomes and the costs of acquiring minimal necessities. Both arose and were first recognized and addressed by community organizations operating without public funds. Both seemed to require public response outside the array of established social welfare services.

In light of evidence of a growing demand for supplementary food and shelter, government officials reacted in patterned ways. (1) They accepted the claims

of need but defined the need as temporary, responding, particularly at first, with ad hoc, stopgap policies dealing, for the most part, only with manifestations of the problems. This approach was facilitated by labeling the needs "emergencies." (2) The institutional focus of these emergency policies was nonprofit emergency service agencies. Many of these responded to the need before government began to play a role. Now they continue to play a role as service providers under government contracts or through the distribution of government food surpluses and other commodities.

The tendency to respond to social problems as emergencies—the "emergency services solution," it might be called—is also evident in other problem areas. Governmental support for programs dealing with violence against women, such as rape crisis centers and battered women's shelters, is provided primarily in emergency form. The problems are defined as emergencies, and the solutions involve utilization of community organizations to provide temporary relief.

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THE MEANING OF EMERGENCY IN SOCIAL POLICY

It should be axiomatic that social problems do not arise accompanied by some natural or inevitable conceptualization of their essential causes and remedies. Indeed, the most critical moments in the life cycle of an issue may well be the outcome of the contest over how it will be understood. Sociologist Joseph Gusfield illustrates this when he shows that as long as the problem of deaths from drinking and driving was defined as a problem of the drivers' moral character or ignorance, automakers could (and until the 1960s did) avoid pressures to manufacture safer vehicles. It follows that defining problems of hunger, homelessness, and violence against women as emergency matters is likely to be consequential for the ways in which these issues are processed. It follows as well that the definition of problems as emergencies persists in part because the designation meets the needs of various actors in the service delivery system. It is important as well that the emergency designation not contradict popular understanding of these matters.

The assertion that designating these problems "emergencies" is not inevitable or natural may raise certain questions. After all, are not these problems emergencies for the people who experience them? But there are alternate conceptualizations.

One is that hunger and homelessness result from individuals' chronic dis-

organization and inability to cope. This view leads to criticism of mental health policy, particularly the failures of deinstitutionalization, and leads to calls for improved mental health services. Indeed, as the issue of homelessness matures, a tendency to disaggregate the homeless population has become evident, and this view, to a degree, has taken hold.

An alternate conceptualization is that hunger and homelessness result from systemic inadequacies of income, or the gap between income and living costs. This perspective would lead to dramatic increases in welfare and other benefits, increased provision of supplementary food assistance, and more vigorous low-income housing policies.

These alternative perspectives are articulated concurrently with the views that the problems are temporary and require short-term, immediate responses. They are not incompatible with policies designed to treat short-term need while more lasting solutions are generated. Yet while the advocates for these perspectives compete to determine which views will prevail, the emergency metaphors remain dominant. These metaphors profoundly affect society's responses to the social problems under discussion.

An emergency is a state of affairs recognized by relevant publics and authorities, consisting of a life-threatening or system-threatening condition of recent onset or severity about which there is a general belief that something can and should be done. The presence of all of these conditions is generally necessary to make the case that an emergency exists.

Emergencies have to signal virtually catastrophic problems to distinguish them from the normal catalog of distresses that affect many in the population. They have to be of recent origin, or else they are more properly categorized as chronic, long-lasting problems to which the person suffering the condition has become inured and with which he or she has already coped. The problem must be presumed to be responsive to intervention, or else one has described a chronic rather than an emergent problem, an act of God, or a matter of fate for which the designation "emergency" is pointless. To illustrate, a plague of locusts is only regarded an emergency in a society that has the capacity to control the pests.

The issue of when a condition is an emergency will change as times, circumstances, resources, and technologies change. Before the automobile, good roads, and high-tech hospitals, people with health needs in rural areas were treated at home or by local physicians without thought of receiving aid in alternative settings. Today, the same conditions lead to heroic efforts to rush victims to modern hospital centers.

An additional observation about emergencies clarifies their function in society and social welfare policy: the designation "emergency" mobilizes resources. To call something an emergency is to claim that extraordinary efforts be made to alleviate the condition. Designation of an emergency legitimates the mobilization. It permits functionaries to take claimants out of turn, treat them differently from the rest, and spend money or devote time to them disproportionately.

This characteristic of emergencies is understood by caretakers and policymakers. Doctors call cases emergencies in order to obtain attention for their patients more quickly. Welfare recipients can receive additional benefits if they qualify for "emergency assistance." Federal policy funnels low-cost loans to flood and drought victims when states of emergency are declared. Troubled youth can receive immediate services, including out-of-home shelter, if their situation is defined as an emergency.

Generally, advantages to recipients of emergency services are the ability to claim and receive extraordinary resources. But there are inherent limits to the needy population as a whole in labeling conditions "emergencies." For example, extraordinary resources can only be mobilized if the number of emergency claims is limited. If everyone claims and seeks special treatment, no one can receive it. Emergency police response numbers only work if the public limits its requests for emergency responses. Emergency rooms in hospitals cease to function effectively when people begin to use emergency rooms for routine treatment.

It follows that there are limits to the extent that society will respond to increases in emergency claims by increasing resources. At some point, public agencies will respond to increased claims by routinizing the provision of aid to the claimant population, reducing the per capita costs of providing emergency assistance, and challenging the basis of the claims themselves. Since resources are finite and other claims over resources compete, the fact that emergency designations mobilize resources creates the conditions for developments directed toward curbing expenditures.

Virtually by definition, emergency services are unstable bases on which to ground policy. Claims are expected to disappear or diminish in intensity, or institutions may be expected to routinize interventions. A critical question is whether emergency policies will deteriorate into routine policies with lower levels of service and reduced constituencies or whether public concern for the affected population is high enough to evoke a commitment to deal with the chronic or structural problems from which emergencies arise.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF LABELING SOCIAL PROBLEMS "EMERGENCIES"

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In the struggle to gain issue recognition, advocates deploy various symbolic strategies to advance their causes. They may claim that vital national interests are at stake now (national defense, trade policy) or in the future (funding social security, rebuilding the highways). Or they may claim that individuals will suffer irreversible injury. The threat of severe damage to health is the not-so-hidden rationale for crash programs for some research (on AIDS, for example) and for emergency allocations to relieve life-threatening conditions.

But these symbolic strategies must be pursued in the face of competing demands. When the food stamp program is unable to meet the food needs of the poor across the board, how can one justify special food supplements for only a portion of the needy? When tens of thousands wait for years to get into public housing, how does one justify diverting housing resources to aid new claimants who are not even on the list? The first consequence of labeling problems "emergencies" is to legitimate the allocation of scarce resources to an individual or group at the expense of others who may suffer from similar conditions but who have not been so labeled.

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Social consensus that a presenting situation constitutes an emergency permits resource mobilization directed toward stabilizing conditions but says nothing about long-term problem resolution. Disaster victims, for example, are provided shelter, health services, and food, but their homes are not restored under disaster relief policies. Likewise, people who claim they are hungry may receive a hot meal but are not provided long-term income support. Nor are the homeless provided with long-term shelter arrangements under emergency policies, although the high cost of emergency facilities puts a premium on moving people out of existing shelters and finding more stable solutions that are less costly on a per capita, per day basis. (Even when homeless families are moved out of shelters into permanent housing, this generalization may apply because without long-term income supplements they may fall back into homelessness.) Agencies may provide troubled youth with short-term shelter and services but be unable to provide adequate long-term services or support.

Paradoxically, despite the very high costs of sheltering people on an emergency basis, emergency shelters may actually be cheaper than some plausible alternative policies. Although putting people up in hotels and motels seems scandalously expensive, it is vastly cheaper than addressing the problem of providing adequate living standards, affordable housing, or long-term placement. This is because the only people one has to serve on food lines or in emergency shelters are the people who come forward to accept emergency aid. If one were to provide for peoples' income needs, in fairness, eligibility for relief would have to be available to all people with low incomes. Moreover, emergency designations allow policymakers to avoid or postpone consideration of expensive restructuring or expansion of existing services to address long-term needs.

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THE INSTABILITY OF THE EMERGENCY SERVICES SOLUTION

By definition, emergencies are short-lived phenomena; the designation characterizes situations that appear relatively suddenly and are not likely to be long lasting. The designation "emergency" permits extraordinary mobilization of resources, but at some point these resources must be diverted from other uses. The uses that compete with emergency social problems have their claimants and advocates. Extraordinary resource utilization also attracts critics concerned about overall expenditures and governmental tax burdens. It follows that political pressures will eventually arise to transform emergency activity into more routinized policies.

Routinization has several implications. With respect to the character of service, government is likely to seek imposition of rules and regulations that make the practices of emergency service agencies conform to government standards. For example, such rules may require these agencies to employ norms of equity in the selection and treatment of clients. Many battered-women shelters and rape crisis centers find themselves forced to adjust their programs in response to government requirements that they select clients based on nondiscriminatory principles and consideration of financial status in the duration of client treatment.

At a broader level, routinization can result in reduced public commitments. It can lead to low-level continuation of emergency services in routinized fash-

ion. It can also result in creation of new, heightened public expectations and obligations. The long-term struggle in emergency services is over which of these divergent futures will ultimately prevail.

In struggles over emergency services, some interests will seek initially to reduce or minimize the sense of public urgency or need (just as other interests will seek to maximize the size and sense of urgency of the problem). The insistence of high-ranking federal officials that hunger does not exist in the United States and the report of the Department of Housing and Urban Development that the problem of homelessness is considerably smaller than had been portrayed in the media are characteristic of this sort of reaction.

But social problems are not simply epiphenomena of the media; they are rooted in underlying social realities that are only partially driven by collective perceptions. Sometimes emergencies evaporate because the underlying social reality does not sufficiently support emergency campaigns. For example, the campaign to save missing children has lost support in the face of convincing challenges to the severity of the problem. The number of missing children was originally projected at 2 million each year. Recently critics have observed that most of the 2 million are runaways, children missing but soon found without notifying the police, or children involved in custody disputes.

Some emergencies devolve into a middle ground of routinized treatment, in which they continue to receive support for amelioration, but at modest funding levels. They may have distinct but relatively narrow constituencies, or they may not be very costly to sustain. Shelters for abused women may have suffered (or enjoyed) this fate, having become relatively uncontroversial elements of federal and state service provision plans but with little ability to grow or resist cutbacks at the margins.

Hunger and homelessness, however, have not diminished as emergencies. Public officials such as big city mayors, and advocates at the local and national levels, continue to demonstrate successfully that these problems have not gone away and, if anything, have continued to grow. Moreover, the very provision of emergency food and shelter creates conditions that keep the problems in the public eye. Long lines at soup kitchens, crowding around shelter doors, and police sweeps of the homeless on freezing nights hold society's attention. The visibility of emergency programs, as we have argued, also helps recruit clients.

Faced with the need to continue to fund emergency aid programs at high levels, public officials have few options as long as problems are defined as emergencies. They may seek to narrow eligibility or otherwise reduce the pool of eligible claimants. In the case of surplus commodities, federal officials

sought to persuade states to narrow income eligibility for free food in order to reduce demand and minimize the number of unserved needy. Massachusetts officials limited the pool of claimants for spaces in emergency shelters for adolescents by accepting referrals only from state agency personnel. In the case of homelessness, local officials have questioned claimants for emergency housing more closely concerning whether they have other options. They have at times also tried to ensure that publicly supported shelter options are not perceived as excessively attractive, lest people abandon questionable private alternatives for public services.

How long can social problems be treated as emergencies if there is high demand? When, in the early 1970s, the welfare rights movement sought to exploit the availability of emergency assistance by encouraging claims, states met the challenge by "cashing out" emergency aid so that every recipient received some additional benefits. This reform had the effect of preventing individuals from making extraordinary claims on the system. Yet the more visible and apparent the need for emergency relief, the less will any administrative solution to emergency services expenditures prove politically feasible.

Persistent emergencies eventually focus attention on the need for systemic solutions. City governments have begun to respond to homelessness with proposals for increases in low-income housing and housing appropriate to the needs of the subpopulations of elderly, families, veterans, alcoholics, and mentally ill that combine to make up the homeless population. State governments have begun to examine how to deploy resources to prevent families from becoming homeless. The persistence of emergencies makes it difficult for public officials to ignore the need for long-run answers, however expensive they may be.

Emergency services are inherently unstable. The size and severity of the problem appears to require public responses, while the high cost of providing emergency services suggests the desirability of normalizing service provision. Up to a point, responding to social problems as emergencies serves public officials who, for one reason or another, wish to minimize institutional commitments. But responding in emergency terms can result in costs, issues of fairness, and problem visibility that will soon make it difficult to continue to respond in emergency fashion.

QUESTIONS

1. What are the various characteristics of social problems that claimsmakers frame as emergencies?

2. Whose interests does the emergency frame serve?
3. Identify a problem that has recently been framed as an emergency. Identify some alternative ways that this problem could have been framed.
4. Identify the various reasons why it is more attractive for policymakers to frame social problems as emergencies than to embrace one of these alternative frames.