

DISASTER RESEARCH CENTER
THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY
COLUMBUS, OHIO 43201

Working Paper # 43

PROBLEMS AND DIFFICULTIES IN THE USE
OF LOCAL EOC'S IN NATURAL DISASTERS

By

E. L. Quarantelli
Department of Sociology
Disaster Research Center
The Ohio State University

5/72

PROBLEMS AND DIFFICULTIES IN THE USE OF LOCAL EOC'S IN NATURAL DISASTERS

Introduction

Emergency Operation Centers (EOCs) have become in recent years standard features of disaster activities in most American communities. This brief report examines some of the problems and difficulties associated with their use during times of stress. The observations reported are drawn from an analysis of the data gathered by the Disaster Research Center (DRC) in actual field studies of nearly 100 different disasters since late 1963. Thus, the report covers the functioning of local EOCs in almost all major natural catastrophes and many of moderate magnitude in the United States in the last eight years, as well as their use in some related community emergencies (e.g., major explosions, forest fires, dam breaks, etc.) Since our purpose is to arrive at generalizations and to establish common elements, specific disasters and localities and organizations are not identified in the report.

It should also be noted that our focus is explicitly on problems and difficulties. This is because we are interested in noting implications for disaster and emergency planning. Such a focus should not obscure the general point, which we shall restate later, that the concept of a local EOC for disaster purposes is a very valid one, and that most function relatively well in most emergencies. Our highlighting of problems and difficulties, however, is an attempt to suggest and imply ways of further improving their efficiency and effectiveness in crisis situations.

We should also note that as pre-planned EOCs have become standard features of local American community life in the last few years, some of the following observations were more relevant in the past than now. Likewise, our observations are less applicable to disaster prone communities than to areas with little disaster experiences. However, while these qualifications are necessary in specific instances, nevertheless, what follows is probably a rather accurate picture of the problems and difficulties in the use of local EOCs in natural disasters in American society.

Some Major Questions

In our analysis we found it useful to ask four major questions about local EOCs.

- 1) Who participates in EOCs?
- 2) What is done at EOCs?
- 3) Where are EOCs located?
- 4) When are EOCs active?

Some Major Observations

Who participates in EOCs?

1) Since most EOCs follow an open door policy (i.e., almost anyone is allowed to walk in) they tend at times of peak activities to become overcrowded with people.

2) Because of such crowding, internal management (e.g., space allocation) of the EOC sometimes becomes a problem.

3. It is often unclear to most participants who is in charge of the EOC itself.

4. Many persons present are often volunteers or at least not official members of any formal groups as such and in this sense are not responsible to anyone or under any organizational authority.

5. Representatives from official organizations are usually 2nd or 3rd level staff personnel, whose policy and decision making powers are generally limited.

6. Operational and official heads of key emergency organizations frequently "drop in" but their lack of continuous attendance occasionally leads to inconsistent decisions and policies emanating from EOCs.

7. Local community organizations responsible for emergency activities are almost always represented at EOCs with the exception of hospitals, which are seldom either directly or indirectly represented in EOC activities.

8. Non-local organizations (e.g., county, state, regional or national level groups) are not always represented at local EOCs particularly in the early stages of a disaster, with resulting difficulties at times in overall community coordination.

9. Even when representatives of non-local organizations are present, they are not always well integrated into an EOC operation, in part because they are usually strangers insofar as local people are concerned.

10. Liaison personnel from less familiar organizations in particular are not always recognized or even known to be present at EOCs.

Overall, local EOCs tend to have too many people in them, do not always have the "right" representatives, and suffer somewhat from lack of internal management and coordination of the people present.

What is done at EOCs?

1. There is often both lack of clarity and consensus, even in pre-planned local EOCs, on the major function of EOCs and the specific tasks to be undertaken therein.

2. Irrespective of prior planning or intent, at least six different tasks are typically carried on at EOCs: coordination, policy making, operational, information gathering, dispersal of public information, and hosting of visitors.

3. Coordination tasks (i.e., those directed at relating organizations to one another effectively, and relating capabilities of organizations to disaster demands are usually handled initially rather poorly because of lack of adequate information inputs.

4. Policy making (i.e., those tasks involving decision making vis-a-vis the overall community response) often is given precedence over coordination even to the point of organizational officials looking for matters on which to make decisions.

5. Operations (i.e., those tasks which directly meet disaster demands rather than those directed at coordination or other response demands) are particularly entered into if some slack or failure is seen in the activities of operational emergency organizations.

6. Information gathering tasks (i.e., those directed at efforts to determine the nature and extent of disaster conditions) are not just always the initial focus of activities of EOCs, but at times are continued to the extent that they degenerate into the seeking of information for information's sake.

7. Dispersal of public information (i.e., those tasks directed at informing the news media and the general public) at times dominates and in fact may interfere with other EOC tasks.

8. Hosting of visitors (i.e., those tasks necessary to handle the convergence of VIPs and others on EOCs) is frequently a major source of conflict and stress, although often kept latent, between local community officials and people, and all outsiders.

9. The very concept of coordination is interpreted in a wide variety of ways ranging from the formalizing of overall community priorities on emergency problems, to the act of an organization announcing to others what it has already done.

10. The role of chief coordinator at EOC's is far from standardized either as to who should take or how the role is to be played - although generally it is taken by an official usually associated with civil defense in some way, with the effort to exercise influence depending more on pre-emergency social ties than on formal or planned official relationships.

11. There sometimes develops at EOCs a high degree of coordination within clusters of organizations working on the same or similar disaster problems, a coordination not extended to groups outside of the given cluster.

12. EOCs are more effective at gathering than at exchanging information, and more effective at exchanging information than distributing it between organizations.

13. In general, record keeping is rather poor at most EOCs.

14. More specific tasks in an EOC are emergent than is usually recognized in pre-planning, especially with respect to the obtaining and processing of information.

Overall, local EOCs tend to have multiple and far from integrated functions and tasks, and particularly have a variety of problems both with respect to coordination and information.

Where are EOCs located?

1. While most EOCs in recent years have tended to be located in stand-by emergency facilities usually provided by civil defense, in communities without overall disaster planning, they generally are located in the quarters of some emergency organization or at some make-shift location.

2. Pre-planned EOCs, because their locations are known, are more likely to be the focus of a convergence of volunteers, requests and messages than more spontaneously evolved EOCs.

3. A few private groups and organizations, involved in disaster related activities, sometimes are hesitant to send representatives to EOCs because of their location in public facilities.

4. Because of lack of space and overcrowding (for reasons indicated earlier) and consequent noise and lack of privacy, there is an occasional tendency for a secondary EOC to be established away from the main EOC, sometimes taking the form of a communication/information center, and sometimes the form of a policy/decision making center.

5. It is very rare to find situations where any consideration has been given to the relocation of an EOC if the planned stand-by facility can not be used.

Overall, even when the locations of local EOCs are pre-planned, some potential problems still exist.

When are EOCs active?

1. There is considerable variation in both when and how EOCs are established and activated.

2. Although EOCs are generally established after major disasters, this is not universally the case.

3. In increasingly rarer cases in recent years, EOCs are sometimes not established until the emergency period in the community is almost over.

4. In situations with warning time for a potential disaster, EOCs are far more likely to be activated if they have been pre-planned, but not always.

5. Responsibility for activating pre-planned EOCs is not always clear in disaster plans and in actual cases seems to depend on almost accidental factors.

6. Initial activation of a pre-planned EOC before a disaster usually involves only a partial mobilization of personnel and organizations, with full mobilization occurring only when the threat becomes rather immediate.

7. In most cases, EOCs are not used after the emergency period is over.

8. Very rarely are there even any rough criteria available on when an EOC is to be closed after being opened, and on who has the responsibility for such a decision.

Overall, there is still some lack of clarity surrounding the **initiation**, duration and closure of local EOCs.

Some Final Observations

EOCs are used in disasters because they have either been pre-planned, because of earlier emergency experience of the community, or because the crisis situation generated a need for such an activity. In recent years, the factor of pre-planning has become dominant. As civil defense has encouraged natural disaster planning, more and more communities have developed stand-by EOC facilities and an associated social organization usually centered in the local civil defense office.

There is little question about the great value and viability of the concept of an EOC for disaster purposes. The observations above, drawn from DRC field studies, show that there are still some problems associated with the use of local EOCs in natural disasters. However, the problems and difficulties are of the kind that can be solved with better pre-planning, more realistic training exercises and simulations, and a willingness of communities to allocate necessary resources. Irrespective of the reasons EOCs were developed for in the first place, they have already proved their worth in American society. ¹

¹ In our review of disaster activities, DRC was also asked to look at the use of shelters, communication facilities, and other civil defense nuclear related capabilities. However, our examination of past disasters uncovered no use of shelters, and only very isolated use of communication facilities or other civil defense nuclear related capabilities at times of natural disasters. Thus, this report has concentrated almost exclusively on EOCs, these being a matter in which there has been very heavy involvement of civil defense.