ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to shed light on the distinctive experiences and needs of a population that is poorly understood, particularly with respect to disasters and their effects. Although homeless populations are referred to in studies of disaster vulnerability, discussions of their unique vulnerabilities and experiences are generally referred to tangentially. Further, while studies of homelessness have occurred in sociological research more broadly, pre-disaster homelessness has not shared a similar weight of attention in disaster studies. This project is exploratory in nature and seeks to contribute to knowledge on homelessness and disaster through an examination of the unique vulnerabilities, experiences, and recoveries of pre-disaster homeless individuals during and following the 2013 Boulder floods. The research draws on participant observation and interview data with staff members from organizations that serve the homeless, public officials, and homeless individuals who were present during the floods in order to gain an understanding of their flood experiences and recovery. Data collection and analysis are ongoing, and the findings discussed thus far are preliminary.

Introduction

Homelessness is a visible social problem in Boulder as well as a national social issue—with over 600,000 individuals experiencing homelessness across the country [1]. Despite this fact, policy decisions pertaining to homelessness are frequently made without incorporation of extensive social science research. This project is exploratory in nature and seeks to understand the experiences and recovery of pre-disaster homeless individuals, and the organizations that serve the homeless, following the September 2013 Boulder Floods. Although there was a substantial amount of flooding in many areas within the State of Colorado, the scope of this study is limited to the City of Boulder. Boulder’s homeless population and services for homeless individuals are unique in comparison to many other Colorado locales. Roughly 2,300 homeless individuals are known to live in Boulder, constituting over 20 percent of the estimated homeless population within the Denver Metro area [2]. Boulder County was also one of the hardest hit counties in the state during the 2013 floods.

The purpose of this exploratory research is to shed light on the distinctive experiences and vulnerabilities of a poorly understood population with respect to disasters and their effects. In particular, I am interested in understanding the challenges that homeless individuals and organizations that serve the homeless faced during the Boulder floods, as well as how they have responded to and continue to recover from the event. This study is significant in that it will help to broaden the scope of knowledge on an understudied vulnerable group in studies of disaster. Furthermore, this project may also serve organizations and local officials in Boulder by informing and potentially guiding future policy decisions pertaining to disaster preparedness, mitigation and recovery for the homeless population.
Homelessness and Disaster

Some early work has examined the effects of disaster on homeless individuals [3][4], but a review of the literature over the past ten years shows there has been very little emphasis on the experiences of the pre-disaster homeless. Although homeless populations are referred to in studies of disaster vulnerability, discussions of their unique vulnerabilities and experiences are generally referred to tangentially [5][6][7]. Further, while studies of homelessness have occurred in sociological research more broadly [8][9], pre-disaster homelessness has not shared a similar weight of attention in disaster studies.

Factors that contribute to homeless individuals’ vulnerability range from individual-level characteristics such as high rates of mental illness, PTSD, alcoholism and physical disability to structural factors including criminalization of the homeless via strict camping bans, for example, as well as limited political efficacy [10][11][12][13][14]. These factors contribute to the unique vulnerability of the homeless in the face of disaster—making it more difficult for members of this population to effectively prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters.

Methodology

In order to gain an understanding of the experiences and recovery of homeless individuals and the organizations that serve them, I draw on participant observation and interview data with organizational staff, public officials, and homeless individuals who were present during the floods. The study design of this project involves a variety of methodologies: 1) semi-structured interviews with staff from organizations that serve the homeless and public officials that serve the homeless, 2) participant observation at shelters and homeless service organizations, 3) unstructured interviews with individuals who utilize resources from homeless service organizations, 4) unstructured interviews with homeless individuals in Boulder who may not be receiving aid through social service organizations, and 5) unstructured group interviews with homeless participants who may or may not use resources provided by homeless service organizations.²

This study was approved by the Institutional review Board at the University of Colorado at Boulder. All participants were made fully aware that participation in this study was voluntary and that they would not receive compensation for participation. The identities of all participants have been protected in order to maintain anonymity and confidentiality.

Initial Findings

Below I have outlined initial findings from participant observation activities, semi-structured and unstructured interviews. Data collection and analysis are underway.

Marginalization of the Homeless During the Floods

During the peak of the flooding when sirens were sounding to alert individuals to seek higher ground, many homeless persons sought refuge at a local emergency disaster shelter.³ Once there,

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² I am conducting unstructured interviews with adult homeless participants—excluding individuals identified as homeless youth or homeless family units, for example.
³ The emergency shelters for adult homeless individuals in Boulder operate primarily in the winter months (October-April). The flood occurred in September—during a time when these shelters were not open for emergency stay.
homeless individuals were turned away despite claims from the county to homeless service providers that their clients and other homeless individuals would be taken care of during a time of disaster. Those individuals who were sent away from the disaster shelter because they could not provide a home address were pushed back out into harsh elements. Therefore, being turned away from the public shelter was not only frustrating, humiliating or inconvenient; rather, it put them at even greater risk during the floods.

This episode exemplifies the outcome of the marginalized status of the homeless and how their status creates barriers to resources—in this case food and shelter—for them during a disaster event. Throughout a majority of the interviews with staff members and clients, this incident is brought up without a prompt from me—demonstrating the significance and resulting trauma of the event. Furthermore, homeless participants who utilized the public disaster shelter after the incident had blown over mentioned that they were separated from the housed disaster victims and continued to feel ostracized.

**Communication issues**

Communication was a significant issue during the floods—as reported by homeless participants and staff members from homeless service organizations. Communication is always difficult with this population, but the floods proved it to be even more difficult considering the fact that much was at stake in terms of safety. Both staff members and homeless participants mentioned that homeless individuals received information about resources and shelter primarily through word of mouth, which is a typical line of communication. However, word of mouth as a means of communication during the floods proved to be inaccurate at times. For example, many homeless persons were told to go to ad hoc shelter locations that were flooded.

Several participants reported feelings of confusion and distress—mentioning that they felt they had nowhere to go. Moreover, communication issues were prevalent both within and between homeless service organizations. Many staff members were stranded as a result of the floods and were not able to be reached or make it to work in order to advocate for their clients or open up shelter locations.

**Disaster loss is relative**

Disaster loss is relative. While the material losses of the homeless may seem menial in comparison to losing a basement or car, for example, their losses were nonetheless traumatic and severely hindered their response to and recovery from the floods. Homeless individuals’ losses further demonstrate how marginalization plays out in a disaster context. When you only have minimal material possessions, which are possessions primarily used for day-to-day survival, you are put at much greater risk when these items are lost or destroyed. For example, many participants lost clothes, cooking ware, sleeping bags, and tents, which made it extremely difficult for them to go about their daily routines. Furthermore, many participants lost IDs and birth certificates. One participant reported that by losing such items, including his phone, he was unable to apply for jobs and receive calls from potential employers.

**Next Steps**

Over the course of the following year, I plan to continue interviewing public officials and conduct a convenience sample of homeless individuals in Boulder who may not be receiving aid through social service organizations. In order to do this, I will visit public areas where several
homeless people frequently convene (e.g. public libraries, parks, and trails along Boulder Creek. Finally, I will continue to conduct group interviews with homeless individuals who may or may not be utilizing services provided by organizations that serve the homeless. Data analysis will be conducted in conjunction with ongoing research activities so as to inform and guide my research questions while out in the field.

At the end of this study, I intend to present an analysis of how homeless individuals and organizations in Boulder responded and continue to recover from the floods, as well as a more in-depth understanding of homeless persons’ vulnerability to hazards and disaster. This research can potentially guide policy and planning in such a way that the needs of this overlooked population might be addressed prior to and during a time of disaster.

References


11. Enarson, Elaine. 2007. Ibid.

