Homelessness and Disaster in Boulder, CO

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to shed light on the distinctive experiences and vulnerabilities of a population that is poorly understood, particularly with respect to disasters and their effects. While studies of homelessness have occurred in sociological research more broadly, pre-disaster homelessness has not shared a similar weight of attention in disaster sociology. Further, although homeless populations are referred to in studies of disaster vulnerability, discussions of their unique vulnerabilities and experiences are referred to tangentially. This project is exploratory in nature and examines the unique vulnerabilities, experiences and recoveries of pre-disaster homeless individuals during and following the 2013 Boulder floods. The study 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. Data collection and analysis are ongoing. The findings presented thus far are preliminary.

2013 Colorado Floods

The floods that recently struck Colorado in September 2013 left many individuals displaced, damaged homes, cities and towns, and took the lives of eight people. Media reports of the flooding categorized the events as “biblical” and lauded as a “100 year flood” (Hughes and Welch 2013; Memmott 2013; Sederholm 2013). While hyperbole was frequent in many of the media reports, the physical and emotional devastation described was nonetheless traumatic, and there was severe damage throughout parts of Colorado. During the days of September 11th to September 15th, rains intensified and floodwaters ravaged over twenty counties. The flooding caused roughly $475 million in statewide road and bridge damage (Colorado Office of Emergency Management)—not to mention the presently unknown economic effects to private businesses and public services. President Obama signed a Disaster Declaration for the State of Colorado on September 15th, 2013, which made federal funding available only to Boulder County at the time (Office of the Press Secretary). Later, other counties were amended to the disaster declaration (The Mountain Mail 2013).

Why study homelessness and disaster?

Some early work has examined the effects of disaster on homeless individuals (see for example, Phillips 1996 and Sar 1996), but a review of the literature the past ten years shows there has been very little emphasis on the experiences of the pre-disaster homeless. Homeless populations are frequently neglected in sociological research (Irvine 2013; Meanwell 2012; Rossi 1989; Snow and Anderson 1993), homelessness has not shared a similar weight of attention in disaster sociology.

Research Methods

1. Semi-structured interviews with staff from organizations that serve the homeless and public officials that serve the homeless
2. Participant observation at various shelters and organizations
3. Unstructured interviews aimed at obtaining personal narratives with individuals who utilize the resources from organizations serving homeless persons
4. Unstructured group interviews with homeless individuals in Boulder who may not be receiving aid through social service organizations

Research Conducted Thus Far

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Semi-structured interviews</th>
<th>Unstructured group interviews</th>
<th>Total # of participants</th>
<th>Participant Observation Hours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n=13</td>
<td>n=17</td>
<td>2 (n=10)</td>
<td>N=40</td>
<td>65 total hours</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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I have completed over 60 hours of participant observation at three organizations that serve homeless adults in Boulder. Through these organizations, I have interviewed 12 staff members and some of these sites may take years to recover, if ever.

Initial Findings

Over the course of the next few months, I plan to conduct semi-structured interviews with public officials from the city and county. The guide will address multiple topics ranging from the office of the emergency manager to communication and difficulties communicating to the homeless population. The main form of communication regarding where homeless individuals could seek shelter was through word of mouth—information about where to go was frequently delayed.

Communication Issues

Disaster loss is relative

"I didn’t really expect us to be turned away [to a homeless shelter]."

Staff member: "We’re home, it’s not like we lost a house, and it’s a very big deal, you don’t want to be recognized that by any means of the imagination, if you lost your tent, your sleeping bag and your cooking gear the only thing you need—and it’s happened—you’re every bit as affected. And so they were institutionalized."

Staff member: "I also think that homeless people in Boulder don’t expect it to be as bad as it is. Like I don’t think people were that surprised when they were kind of turned away from the shelter or treated badly. So they kind of rolled with it."

There were multiple communication issues during the flood—both in terms of internal organizational chain of command and difficulties communicating to the homeless population. The main form of communication regarding where homeless individuals could seek shelter was through word of mouth—information about where to go was frequently delayed.

Disaster loss is relative

"They told us as they could come over there [to the public shelter]. We gave them bus passes to go over there and they wouldn’t take them. They treated the homeless really, really bad… just because they’re homeless doesn’t mean they don’t count."

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Next Steps

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Additionally, I plan to 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., library, parks, trails along Boulder Creek).

Lastly, I will continue conducting group interviews with homeless individuals who may or may not be utilizing services provided by organizations that serve the homeless. I anticipate group interviews ranging in size from 4-8 people. The purpose of utilizing group interviews is to create an environment for individuals to talk freely among friends, acquaintances, or individuals with similar living situations and socioeconomic statuses. Additionally, group interviews provide a space for interviewees to bounce ideas off one another, which could make the data much richer or provide different information than what an unstructured interview alone may be able to provide (Berg and Lune 2011; Morgan 1988).

References


