



COMMENTARY

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Commentary: Extraordinary Attention, Ordinary Neglect: The High Cost of Disaster Preparedness and Response

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Introduction

Beginning with the Oklahoma bombing of 1985 and rapidly accelerating after 9/11, 2001, the U.S. has greatly expanded resources devoted to the detection and prevention of disasters-intentional, terrorist events as well as natural disasters. Global warming has further accelerated attention and resources given to disasters. Because of the secretive nature of much disaster preparedness, it is difficult to estimate the true scope of resources devoted to it.

This analysis begins by consideration of what constitutes a “disaster” and what distinguishes disaster from non-disaster events. It then estimates the relative burden of disaster and non-disaster events in the U.S. by assessing the number of deaths from each in the U.S. in recent years. In 2016, disaster-related deaths were 0.04% of all deaths in the U.S. A person was about 2,500 times as likely to die from a non-disaster as from a disaster-related cause. Of course, the small number of disaster deaths may be the result of our extensive prevention efforts. But this seems unlikely. Since 1900, disaster-related deaths in the U.S. have rarely exceeded 500 per year-small proportion of all deaths. Since the great attention devoted to disaster preparedness is a relatively recent project, it is unlikely that preparedness accounts for the relatively small number, though undoubtedly preparedness has prevented some disasters.

The analysis then assesses the ratio of public health resources allocated in the U.S. to disaster preparedness versus other public health efforts. Because comparative data are available from this source, the analysis uses the budget of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to make this comparison. In

2019, approximately 370 times as much funding was allocated to disaster-related work as non-disaster related work.

To put these findings together, we allocate an estimated 370 times as much resources to events that are likely to occur only one out of 2,500 times as frequently. On the face of it, these ratios are absurd. The sources of these estimates are likely to be imperfect, but they are likely to be in the ball park.

The analysis then considers the cost of averting deaths from several non-disaster causes of deaths. It is difficult to find data on this question in general, but available information suggests, for example, that, on average, for a one-time cost of approximately \$ 650, a cigarette smoker can be persuaded to give up the habit. On the other hand, it can be estimated that U.S. society pays approximately \$ 7,000 per year for the lost productivity and health consequences of smoking. Thus, in theory, we can actually save money by spending on the prevention of smoking.

In summary, in the U.S., the ratio of expenditures on preparedness to non-preparedness versus associated consequences for disaster and non-disaster events seems extremely high, irrational. It has been shown that humans routinely overestimate the magnitude and frequency of rare events, such as disasters, and underestimate the magnitude and frequency of common events. We may allocate resources accordingly. Such judgments and associated fears may be costly in money and lives. It will be worthwhile to rethink these ratios and consider allocating greater proportions of our resources to non-disaster conditions.

Conflict of Interest

Author declares there is no conflict of interest.

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