

Linda Brookover Bourque, et al.; *The Unpredictable Disaster in a Metropolis: Public Response to the Los Angeles Earthquake of February, 1971*. Los Angeles: UCLA Survey Research Center, 1973. 144 pp.

This final report to the Defense Civil Preparedness Agency of a survey of randomly selected Los Angeles County residents conducted by UCLA's Survey Research Center presents data on individual preparations for disaster, sources of information during the emergency period, and evaluations of major disaster response organizations following an earthquake in the San Fernando Valley in 1971. According to the authors, this disaster is of

particular interest because it occurred with no warning, thus preventing any direct preparation; because it affected a major metropolitan area, making possible comparisons with previous studies of disasters in smaller towns and rural areas; and because it struck at a time (6:00 a.m.) when a majority of the population was at home. Most of the analysis centers on data from a multi-stage cluster sample of 778 Angelenos, divided by residence into High Impact (the cities of Sylmar and San Fernando), Moderate Impact (the remainder of the San Fernando Valley), and Low Impact (the rest of the Los Angeles basin) Zones as determined by seismographic data and damage patterns. The authors' central hypothesis is that an individual's loca-

tion within the community social structure together with his experiences during the immediate post-impact period predict his subsequent behavior and emotional reactions to a disaster.

Less than 11 percent of the Los Angeles County residents surveyed had made emergency preparations before the disaster (such as giving special instructions to family members, purchasing supplies, or rearranging items in their homes), and the experience of a moderately severe earthquake (6.4 on the Richter Scale, 800 aftershocks) seems to have had little effect in changing their outlook. County-wide, only 16 percent reported making such preparations for a future disaster despite the fact that more than half felt another earthquake was likely within the next year. Even among residents in the High Impact Zone, more than half had not made future preparations and less than one-third had discussed with their families the possibility of moving out of Southern California due to the earthquake threat. While such behavior may seem irrational to planners, fatalistic to scholars, and foolhardy to outsiders in general, these findings show the extent to which the threat of major catastrophies becomes almost invisible in the subculture of even the most disaster-prone areas.

Unlike previous studies, Los Angeles residents interviewed had a high opinion of the work of organizations participating in the disaster response such as Civil Defense, the utility companies, and the Red Cross. The authors suggest this results from their greater familiarity with the workings of complex, formal bureaucracies, something residents of small towns and rural areas are unacquainted with until the arrival of "outside" relief agencies. Favorable evaluations were evenly distributed across all three impact zones and

held for those who had direct contact with disaster organizations as well as the remainder of the sample. There is some indication in other data, however, that victims of this disaster who were geographically distant from the area of greatest destruction were less impressed with the quality of response by the agencies involved, and the authors' make an important point in calling attention to the tendency among emergency organizations to define a disaster site as that area with the greatest concentration of damage to the exclusion of other affected regions.

Detracting somewhat from the usefulness of the report is the difficulty for the reader in drawing out the full implications of the data presented. In part this results from attempting to discuss information from one hundred tables in only thirty-two pages of text, but at times it seems that the results of associations for certain pairs of variables are not terribly enlightening, while other more interesting correlations have not been calculated. There is also a certain slipperiness in some of the connections between concepts and variables which the authors recognize in regard to their attempt to measure evaluations of "public officials" but which is also evident in their operational definitions of "victims" and "disaster preparations". In general, however, the research represents a worthwhile case study of the type seldom undertaken since the NORC studies in Arkansas and the Michigan State U. research in Flint-Beecher more than twenty years ago. As the authors have argued, the unique features of this earthquake disaster make the report a useful addition to this earlier literature.

Robert Stallings
Institute for Disaster Preparedness
University of Southern California