

Robert A. Olson, "Individual and Organizational Dimensions of the San Fernando Earthquake," in *San Fernando, California Earthquake of February 9, 1971, Volume II*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1973, pp. 259–312 (\$11.70 for total volume).

This review examines only part of Volume II of a three part series on the 1971 San Fernando earthquake. The volume in question is subtitled "Utilities, Transportation, and Sociological Aspects." Only one of the 14 chapters in the

volume, however, touches on the latter aspect and it is this we examine.

The chapter focuses on the organizational response to the emergency situation created by the San Fernando earthquake of 1971, special attention being paid to the emergency operations of the fire departments, building departments, law enforcement agencies, the Red Cross, and the Salvation Army. An effort is made to identify the problems associated with the response as well as the recommendations furnished by the various organizations for

future emergency responses. In addition, some attention is paid to various special aspects of the earthquake: the medical emergency created by the damage to hospital facilities, the mental health aspects of the earthquake, the problems related to the evacuation of a juvenile detention facility, the role of the mass media in reporting on the effects of the earthquake on real property (especially earthquake insurance and property values), the problems of traffic control and flow as a result of damage induced, the surveying and boundary line problems associated with major ground shifts as a result of the earthquake (including the long-term economic problems), the effects of the earthquake on the voting behavior for school bonds to earthquake-proof older school facilities, and the general community reactions to the disaster (both initially and long-term). The chapter ends with a summary of the principal conclusions and recommendations of the various organizations and agencies for the improvement of future emergency responses.

The descriptive details provide a wide variety of operational insights into the problems and solutions of many unanticipated consequences of an earthquake. While some of the in-the-field experiences related are applicable to all types of emergency responses, the account has its most direct and fruitful payoff for emergency planners in earthquake-prone communities. The account is, however, largely descriptive and has no direct theoretical or methodological benefits. As such, its contribution is mainly limited to that of a heuristic device that is useful for the development and the refinement of contingency emergency plans. While the discussion of the special aspects of the earthquake response is general and broad in scope, it is a well-spring of interesting and important research questions. One of the more obvious research questions concerns the effects of a major disaster on a community medical system. Not only do such situations create increased demands on this system, but as was the case in this earthquake, hospitals themselves are often

affected, which reduces the system's possibilities and necessitates the evacuation of hospital patients. The research on these aspects of disasters is very limited (Blanshan's recent study being an exception), and this account provides some ideas for a more specific examination of the medical system in a disaster situation.

While suggestive, the account has some problems. For example, the perceptions of the various agencies are not only presented but accepted at face value; in the case of the mental health delivery agencies it remains to be seen whether or not they were effective in reducing and treating clients, and whether or not their explanations of this success are valid. A similar point can be raised with regard to the evacuation of people from below the Van Norman reservoirs. Field research of others looking into the same disaster suggests that there was no imminent threat of danger as a result of the damage to the earthen dams. Several engineers took the position that, because of the nature of the construction of the dams, there was no threat of a wall of water being released on the people living below them. On the other hand, it was the perception of the police department that a large number of people were in danger and at one point, not reported in the account being reviewed, the police responded as if the perceived threat was going to become an immediate reality. The implications of differential organizational perceptions, and the dangers of taking official reports as true conveyors of the realities in a situation, are not at all considered in this account. Thus, while the presentation does furnish a wide variety of observations and recommendations, it suffers from a lack of analysis and the absence of a more sophisticated attitude towards organizational accounts and official reports of the agencies involved in the disaster.

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