



Evidence Summary

Public Libraries Can Play an Important Role in the Aftermath of a Natural Disaster

A Review of:

Welsh, T. S. & Higgins, S. E. (2009). Public libraries post-Hurricane Katrina: A pilot study. *Library Review*, 58(9), 652-659.

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Objective – This paper analyzes Hurricane Katrina-related narratives to document the challenges faced by public libraries after the disaster and the disaster-relief services these libraries provided.

Design – A qualitative thematic analysis of narratives obtained by convenience sampling.

Setting – Narratives were collected and analyzed in 2005 and 2006 across the Gulf Coast area of the United States.

Subjects – Seventy-two library and information science students enrolled in the University of Southern Mississippi's School of Library and Information Science. Many worked in local libraries.

Methods – In this pilot study, students

volunteered to participate in a confidential process that involved telling their stories of their post-Hurricane Katrina experiences. Data was collected in a natural setting (the libraries in which the students worked), and inductive reasoning was used to build themes based on these research questions: What post-disaster problems related to public libraries were noted in the students' narratives? What post-disaster public library services were noted in the narratives?

NVivo7 qualitative analysis software was used to analyze and code the narratives. Passages related to public libraries were coded by library location and student. These passages were analyzed for themes related to post-disaster challenges and disaster-recovery services pertaining to public libraries.

Main Results – Ten of the 72 narratives contained passages related to public libraries. The libraries included four in Alabama, one in Louisiana, and five in Mississippi. Results related to the first research question (What post-disaster problems related to public libraries were noted in the students' narrative?) were physical damage to the building, from light damage to total destruction (reported in 8 or 80% of the students' narratives), and inundation by refugees, evacuees, and relief workers (reported in 8 or 80% of the narratives). Results pertaining to the second research question (What post-disaster public library services were noted in the narratives?) included providing information for things such as providing information via the use of computers and the filling out of the Federal Emergency Management Agency and Red Cross aid forms (6 or 60% of the narratives included this), listening and providing comfort (5 or 50% of the narratives), and volunteering and donating, both from others and of the students' own time, money, or materials (noted by 5 or 50% of the narratives).

Conclusion – The researchers concluded that while public libraries suffered devastation during the hurricane, after the hurricane, those libraries that could open provided essential services to people in need. These services included providing access to computers and access to information via computers, aid in filling out necessary relief aid forms, listening and providing comfort, and volunteering time, money, and materials. The public library clearly played a role in both providing information and facilitating communication. Documenting such contributions serves to illustrate the value of public libraries, especially in a post-disaster setting, and helps to demonstrate the value of public libraries in their communities.

Commentary

This pilot study serves to educate readers on how a public library can participate in relief efforts, and it illustrates how people in need

may turn to the public library for assistance. Although the students who responded to the call for participation were volunteers, and thus self-selected rather than part of a random sample, the researchers hold the responses as "valid and reliable" by holding them up to Fisher's narrative theory, which states that "humans are rational beings and faithful to their own experiences" (p. 656). The researchers do acknowledge that the results of this study are not generalizable but can act as a starting point for further studies, although they give no indication of how they might take this work forward.

This study provides interesting additional information. For example, the introduction contains details of the devastation experienced by Gulf Coast communities during and in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The authors provide a glossary, defining such terms as narrative and pilot study, so that the reader has a clear understanding of how these terms are used in this study.

The methods section discusses qualitative research in theoretical terms, but fails to fully establish exactly how the researchers conducted their research. They state that "narrative texts" were obtained from the 72 student volunteers. It is unclear if the students wrote down their experiences and handed them in, or if the term "text" refers to transcriptions of personal interviews. Was a voice recorder used? Did each researcher interview half the participants? Were notes taken? One can assume that because these details are missing, the students indeed wrote down their experiences. Still, it is not specified. As well, the researchers look specifically at two research questions, while only 10 out of the 72 responses contained passages that pertain directly to those questions. It is not stated what else the students were asked to relate about their own post-hurricane experiences.

The presentation of the results is segmented. The authors give an abbreviated report of the results of the two pertinent research questions but do not provide any analysis of the results.

Additionally, after the conclusion and recommendations portion of the article, there is a section entitled "selected narrative excerpts." There, the authors provide verbatim selections from the narratives, but again, do not provide analysis and fail to integrate the quotations with the earlier results. If the quotations are not meant to be part of the results, the authors should have made it clear as to what the quotations were meant to signify.

This research may be useful for advocacy purposes. Being able to illustrate the role of the public library in many different situations is valuable when having to speak to decision makers about funding. This research demonstrates how libraries can affect quality of life and how, even when taken to the extreme, community needs are met. The authors recommend further and more comprehensive qualitative studies to be undertaken to document the challenges faced by libraries and the role of libraries particularly in the aftermath of a disaster.