

Howard Glassman, 09/10/2023

Module 1 Brief: Key Definitions of Disasters

Public health disasters are categorized as natural, man-made, or both (a combination of environmental conditions and man-made). Man-made disasters can be accidental or intentional. All of these types of disasters, by definition, have the potential to disrupt normal functioning of society, cause substantial risk, injury, or death to the impacted population, and require substantial responses that could overwhelm existing resources.

Disasters are also categorized as being either sudden and without prior warning or slow onset. An example of a sudden disaster would be a tornado or flash flood. An example of a slow onset disaster would be a hurricane that is forecast to impact a community in a generally anticipated time frame or an outbreak of an infectious disease over an elongated time period.

From a public health perspective, I believe that natural disasters are the most disruptive and destructive. When comparing the potential scope and size of the two broad types of disasters, natural disasters can more readily disrupt large geographic areas and may require a more coordinated, complex response that would likely require collaboration across jurisdictional areas.

I think that the best indicators to assess the public health impact of a disaster would be both the disaster's initial and long-term impact on service delivery in the impacted communities.

In the initial phase, disruptions to medical care and emergency services would pose a substantial risk to these communities—specifically, people impacted by either the initial disaster itself or its secondary impacts may experience delays in emergency services, which could be harmful.

As the initial phase passes, disruptions to the normal functioning of society can impact the most vulnerable people, particularly the elderly and other people reliant on others to provide them with the care and resources they may require to function. For example, elderly who rely on caregivers or meal delivery services would be in a very vulnerable situation without these services. Longer term disruptions to services and the normal functioning of society could lead to social unrest, as community members become desperate to ensure the health and safety of themselves and their families.