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Key Definitions of Disasters

One could perceive the meaning of the word “disaster” to equate to an emergency or, simply, an extremely negative outcome. In the context of public health, the word “disaster” reflects the level of unpreparedness for the occurrence of a certain situation. In other words, public health disasters arise due to a lack of accounting for the scale of a problem or potentially hazardous event.

There are three categories when assessing disasters: Natural, Man-made, and Complex¹. All three of these instances are considered *disastrous* because they challenge the integrity of the disaster management framework in the realm of public health². A significant factor to consider when analyzing a disaster and its outcomes is how much it has overwhelmed the action plans and protocols dedicated to it.

The most disruptive and destructive kinds of disasters are the ones that contain a mixture of all categories - also known as the complex type of disaster. This is due to their tendency to showcase a “snowball effect” which often causes even bigger issues to arise. This “cocktail” of disasters often leads to an even larger overarching disaster, which often implies a higher level of danger and destruction.

“Acute” disasters are a category of disasters that are a danger -- and sometimes fatal -- “upon impact”. Many natural disasters, such as hurricanes, tsunamis, etc. fit into this category and are extremely difficult to track and predict. On the other hand, there are “slow onset/ advanced warning” disasters are a little easier to plan for, due to their gradual progression³. Some examples of slow onset disasters are drought/famine and certain epidemics. Therefore, the most destructive types of disasters are complex, as many have been triggered by acute disasters that led to multiple slow onset disasters.

The best indicators for public health impact, in this scenario, are the changes in morbidity and mortality due to disasters. Analyzing the statistics of lives lost - and those whose health was negatively affected as a result - is the only way of knowing the true gravity of a disaster. Morbidity and mortality data can even measure the actual *impact* of public health disaster management efforts when used retrospectively, in the case of comparing the aftermath of historical disasters and their action plans to current strategies used today.

The goal of public health is to “prevent, protect against, quickly respond to and recover from health emergencies”¹. Monitoring the scale of what is meant to be prevented - before and

after such destructive events - would be the clearest way of tracking public health impactful progress in a community and the world.

References

1. Gershon, Robyn. "Instructor's Notes 1A" *Instructor's Notes A: Definition and Classification of Disasters and Preparedness, 2023*
2. Katz, Rebecca. "Chapter One." *Essentials of Public Health Preparedness*, Jones & Bartlett Learning, Burlington, 2013.
3. Randall, Alex. "Understanding a Slow Disaster: Getting to Grips with Slow-Onset Disasters, and What They Mean for Migration and Displacement -." *Climate & Migration Coalition*, 4 Mar. 2018.