

Addressing domestic violence should be part of recovery plan during natural disasters

August 31 2017, by Sheena Rice



Researchers at the University of Missouri have identified a framework that can help victims of domestic violence before, during and after disaster events.

Credit: Disaster and Community Crisis Center (DCC) at MU

Hurricane Harvey is the most recent natural disaster that has caused damage and destruction across many communities. When disasters strike an entire community, they do not affect all community members equally, and victims of domestic violence are often particularly vulnerable. Researchers at the University of Missouri have now identified a framework that can help victims of domestic violence before, during and after disaster events.

"Disasters can cause significant emotional trauma or stress, injure or kill individuals, and threaten basic human needs such as access to food, water and housing," J. Brian Houston, associate professor of communication and director for the Disaster and Community Crisis Center (DCC) at MU. "We know from past research that disasters can increase the prevalence and severity of domestic [violence](#); they have compounding effects on the recovery of women and families experiencing this violence."

To establish strategies for communities to better address [victims](#) of domestic violence, Houston worked with Jennifer First, doctoral candidate in the MU School of Social Work and Disaster Mental Health Program Manager with DCC; and Nathan First, a clinical instructor in the Department of Educational, School and Counseling Psychology in the MU College of Education and clinical case manager at the Family Access Center of Excellence of Boone County.

"To promote women's safety and well-being, domestic violence services and resources should be integrated into disaster-related assistance and

services," Jennifer First said. "Emergency management often conceptualizes disasters in four phases— response, recovery, mitigation and preparedness. Our framework uses this perspective to identify objectives to use before, during and after a disaster to help victims of domestic violence."

Response

Professionals responding to a disaster can promote empowerment for women and children by ensuring their basic needs are met and providing them with comfort and support. This can be done by working with providers to transport victims of violence to shelters and provide information on post-disaster resources and alternative domestic violence contacts.

Recovery

After a disaster, communities can conduct activities to rebuild and recover. The researchers say this is a critical time for victims of violence. Professionals can help by connecting victims to long-term services and promoting social supports for women.

Mitigation

Communities should identify risks and hazards to reduce or eliminate the impact of a disaster incident. The first strategy for this could be developing connections between domestic violence organizations and systems typically active in a disaster, such as disaster responders and law enforcement. As connections are formed, professionals can advocate for additional focus on mitigating domestic violence during [disasters](#).

Preparedness

Domestic violence professionals can participate in activities before a disaster to better prepare individuals, families, organizations and communities to respond if a disaster occurs. One strategy could be to increase domestic violence awareness and training by working with local, state and federal emergency management professionals who can train responders to assist victims of [domestic violence](#).

DCC focuses on enhancing preparedness, recovery and resilience in children, families, schools and communities affected by disaster and community crisis. DCC is an interdisciplinary center with expertise in mental and behavioral health, [social work](#), public health, communication, mass media, social media and journalism. The Department of Communication is in the College of Arts and Science at MU.

"Intimate Partner Violence and Disasters: A Framework for Empowering Women Experiencing Violence in Disaster Settings" was published in *Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work*.

More information: Jennifer M. First et al. Intimate Partner Violence and Disasters, *Affilia* (2017). [DOI: 10.1177/0886109917706338](https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109917706338)

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