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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

One of government’s primary responsibilities is to ensure the safety and security of its citizens. This presents a challenge, since the world is fraught with complex hazards, as illustrated by the present economic crisis, the constant threat of terrorism, and recent major natural disasters. As a society, we ready ourselves to avoid and withstand the harms that may befall us by preparing for them in various ways. That said, we do not fully understand how, why, and when people react to risk, or how effective government preparedness policy initiatives are at improving individual preparedness. Moreover, individual citizens’ perceptions and preferences with respect to preparedness may be different from government decision-makers’ perceptions of risk and associated preparedness priorities. These gaps in our knowledge may undermine our ability to design effective preparedness programs.

Purpose

This report describes the results of a national survey of local public officials about their perceptions of risk and disaster preparedness in their communities, and about how they assess their residents’ attitudes and actions with respect to preparedness. This survey is the second phase of a multi-year research project to characterize perceptions of disaster risk held by individual household decision-makers and local government decision-makers across the United States. The goal of this project is to evaluate the perceptions, incentives, and preferences that influence the choices and behaviors of both individual citizens and local government officials with respect to risk and preparedness.

This phase of the project allows us to compare the perceptions of local government officials across jurisdictions throughout the country, and also to compare the perceptions of public officials to those of US residents. These comparisons help to identify where individual residents and community leaders diverge in terms of their risk assessments and views of preparedness, and to determine whether local government officials’ assessments of residents’ attitudes, behavior, and preferences are consistent with those that citizens themselves report. Identifying similarities and differences across the nation and between government decision-makers and individual citizens will allow us to better tailor preparedness programs. This work extends other research about individual and community readiness and resilience, with a view toward enhancing our understanding of community-level attitudes toward preparedness, and better defining disaster preparedness barriers and solutions.
Methodology

The findings in this report are based on the results of a telephone survey of a national random sample of 816 local government officials conducted from June through mid-October, 2010. The sample was geographically stratified to permit comparison of public officials from different regions of the United States and from coastal and interior communities. The survey asked respondents about their own personal resiliency and tolerance for risk. Then they were asked a series of questions about threats to their community, the likelihood of disaster, how prepared their community is, how prepared their residents are, and how their residents will behave in the face of a disaster. They were also asked to reflect on why residents are not better prepared. Finally, they were asked about spending levels and budget priorities.

Key Findings

- Almost 80% of local government officials nationwide think that the biggest risk facing their city or town is a major natural disaster, whereas only one third of citizens think the biggest risk facing their community is a major natural disaster.

- Forty percent of local government officials believe that the biggest risk facing the nation is a major financial disaster. Almost a third of individual citizens also identify financial disaster as the biggest risk facing the nation.

- Local government officials see a quarter of their residents as very prepared, a quarter as somewhat prepared, a quarter as not very prepared, and a quarter as not at all prepared. Almost three quarters of individual citizens, on the other hand, believe they are very or somewhat prepared.

- Most local government officials (62%) feel that their jurisdiction is spending the right amount on disaster preparedness. Of those officials, 10% also rate their jurisdiction’s readiness to respond to the biggest disaster risk as relatively poor.

- Over half of local government officials (56%) feel that their city or town is as prepared as it needs to be for a major disaster, but over a third report that their jurisdiction is less prepared than it needs to be. Almost ten percent feel they are somewhat or much more prepared than they need to be.

- Local government officials across the country think their jurisdiction could take care of itself after a disaster without outside help for about two weeks on average. They also think it would take about two weeks for meaningful outside assistance to arrive.
• Local officials expect residents to rely most on local emergency responders for help after a disaster, while citizens expect to rely most on themselves.

• Most individuals say they will follow the directions of local officials after a disaster, but local officials are less optimistic that their residents will follow directions.

• Many local government officials (37%) feel that their city or town should be spending somewhat or much more on disaster preparedness, and 30% would make disaster preparedness spending a higher budget priority if it was solely their decision. More than half of citizens nationwide say they would be willing to pay more for disaster preparedness.

• On the other hand, most local officials (68%) would fund disaster preparedness at current levels, and most think their taxpayers would also maintain current funding.

• Local leaders view their residents as fairly resilient and able to recover from a major natural disaster, and but somewhat less resilient in the face of a terrorist attack. This is consistent with how individuals see themselves.

• The top three reasons local officials think their residents don’t prepare for disasters are: that they don’t think it is going to happen to them; that they procrastinate; or that it costs too much time, effort, or money. Individual citizens tend to agree, but also report that they don’t prepare because they don’t know what to do. Of local officials, 21% identified the biggest barrier other than budget constraints to improving municipal disaster preparedness as inadequate public education about preparedness.
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INTRODUCTION

One of government’s primary responsibilities is to ensure the safety and security of its citizens. This is a tall order, since we live in an environment fraught with complex hazards, as illustrated by the present economic crisis, the constant threat of terrorism, and recent major natural disasters. As a society, we ready ourselves to avoid and withstand the harms that may befall us by preparing for them in various ways. That said, there are broad gaps in our understanding of how, why, and when people react to risk, and of how effective government preparedness policy initiatives are at improving individual preparedness. Moreover, citizens’ perceptions and preferences with respect to preparedness may be different from public decision-makers’ perceptions of risk and associated preparedness priorities. Such a disconnect is one reason some programs designed to increase preparedness may not work well.

This report describes the results of a national survey of local public officials about their perceptions of risk and disaster preparedness in their communities, and about how they assess their residents’ attitudes and actions with respect to preparedness. This survey is the second phase of a multi-year research project to characterize perceptions of disaster risk held by individual household decision-makers and local government decision-makers across the United States. The goal of this project is to evaluate the perceptions, incentives, and preferences that influence the choices and behaviors of both individual citizens and local government officials with respect to risk and preparedness.

This phase of the project allows us to compare the perceptions of local government officials across jurisdictions throughout the country, and also to compare the perceptions of public officials to those of US residents. These comparisons help to identify where individual residents and community leaders diverge in terms of their risk assessments and views of preparedness, and to determine whether local government officials’ assessments of residents’ attitudes, behavior, and preferences are consistent with those that citizens themselves report. Identifying similarities and differences across the nation and between government decision-makers and individual citizens will allow us to better tailor preparedness programs. This work extends other research about individual and community readiness and resilience, with a view toward enhancing our understanding of community-level attitudes toward preparedness, and better defining disaster preparedness barriers and solutions.

This study is a project of the Coastal Hazards Center of Excellence (DIEM) funded by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and based at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. The objective of the Center is to conduct innovative research on natural hazards and disasters and to translate the knowledge developed to practice in several areas. Among these is
the area of community resilience, which refers to the ability of individuals and groups of individuals to reduce their exposure to the effects of disasters and to recover quickly from disasters that do occur. This project aims to shed light on the attitudes that underlie resilience by better understanding how communities, including individual residents and local government officials, consider the risks they face and what to do about them.

Studies have repeatedly determined that most US residents are underprepared for a variety of disasters. Some studies show that people have made adequate preparations for short periods of interrupted services. At the same time, trend data reveal an ongoing loss of confidence in government and inadequate levels of personal preparedness. In 2006, a Council for Excellence in Government study determined that only 8% of the US population has done everything that is needed to fully prepare for a disaster, while another 32% having taken no steps to prepare. In addition, people’s level of preparedness has not improved over time. A 2006 DHS study confirmed that “Americans today are no more prepared for a natural disaster or terrorist attack than they were in 2003.” Nonetheless, people generally view themselves as prepared.

Research also reveals that attitudes and beliefs are relevant to preparedness behaviors. Greater perceived risk generally produces support for more proactive government action to manage potential hazards. In addition, personal threat (threats that affect an individual or that person’s immediate family) appears to be more consequential to behavior than is national threat. Also, disasters affect citizens’ trust in government, and public concern about threats to national security may influence cynicism about government. For some scenarios, it has been shown that people who don’t have a lot of trust in government are half as likely to cooperate with government instructions. When political trust rises, though, so too does the demand for increased government intervention. Finally, individuals’ attitudes have been shown to predict support for and willingness to pay for public safety services. That said, most adults are not confident in the government’s ability to oversee spending and set priorities on terrorism and disaster preparedness.

The study presented in this report extends our current understanding by exploring local government officials’ assessments of the likely threats their municipalities face and of the preparedness and resilience of their communities. In addition, we learn about the decision makers’ views of their residents’ attitudes toward preparedness, preparedness actions, and willingness to pay for preparedness. Finally, we look at their assessment of current community preparedness and preparedness spending in terms of sufficiency, public support, and barriers to preparedness. Specifically, this study offers insights into three things: the risk perceptions of local government officials in the US; the differences in attitudes about disaster risk and preparedness between local government officials and citizens; and differences between coastal and interior communities.
METHODOLOGY

To meet the project’s objectives, we administered a seventeen minute telephone survey to a representative national sample of 816 local government officials in the summer and fall of 2010.

Sample Design

The sample of local officials was stratified across eight geographic regions. The sample strata included four US coastal regions and four US interior regions as shown in the map below: the Pacific Coast (pink); the Gulf Coast (orange); the Atlantic Coast (yellow), including the north (Delaware and north) and south (Virginia and south); the Interior Northeast (purple); the Interior North Central (blue); the Interior South (dark green); and the Interior West (pale green).

Figure 1. Map showing sample strata. The interior regions correspond to the four regions defined by the US census. This map was created using Microsoft MapPoint.
The interior regions correspond to the four regions defined by the US Census Bureau. For each region, a list of municipalities was generated. These lists were sorted by county and place name. Municipalities were then selected systematically using a fixed sampling interval until a sample of 2500 jurisdictions was generated for each region. Finally, from this available sample for each region, surveys were completed with a senior local official in each of at least 100 municipalities. Table 1 shows the number of respondents in each stratum, and the percentage of the sample they represent.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stratum</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
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<tr>
<td>Interior Northeast</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interior Midwest</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>13.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interior South</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interior West</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>12.3</td>
</tr>
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<td>Total Interior Local Government Officials</td>
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<td>50.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Northeast Atlantic Coastal Counties</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>12.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Atlantic Coastal Counties</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gulf Coastal Counties</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Coastal Counties</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>12.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Coastal Local Government Officials</td>
<td>403</td>
<td>49.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total sample</td>
<td>816</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
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</table>

*Table 1. Sample structure.*

To assure consistency, appropriate expertise, and relevant decision-making authority, we identified our target respondents as each jurisdiction’s chief executive decision-maker, whether elected or appointed, or their immediate deputy. The roles and job titles of public decision makers in cities and towns vary across the nation. Interviewers therefore employed a screening process and a list of thirteen acceptable job titles to identify the senior manager or their deputy in each municipality. In jurisdictions that were not professionally managed (i.e. that did not have a city manager), the respondent was to be the chief elected official (or their deputy), holding the title of Mayor, First Selectman, or something similar. Certainty about the
respondents’ formal decision-making role within their jurisdictions was important to the validity of this project. Thus, when all interviews were complete, respondent job titles were verified, and unsuitable respondents were replaced and new surveys completed.

**Question Design**

This study’s objective is employ surveys to understand the perceptions, expectations, and priorities of local public officials, and to compare these to the perceptions and preferences of individual citizens. The survey of citizens (executed in Fall, 2009) and the survey of local officials reported here both rest on a framework that conceptualizes five aspects of risk perception:

1. **Risk Portfolio** (What is at risk?)
2. **Risk Perception** (How much risk to my portfolio is there?)
3. **Risk Tolerance** (How much risk will I accept?)
4. **Risk Orientation** (How do I behave in the face of risk?)
5. **Risk Mitigation** (What actions should individuals and government take?)

To operationalize this framework for local officials, they were first asked about their own personal resiliency and tolerance for risk. Then, they were asked a series of questions about their perceptions of:

- Threats to the community.
- The likelihood of a disaster occurring.
- The current level of community preparedness.
- The adequacy of preparedness spending.

Next, local officials were asked about their perceptions of the residents of their jurisdiction:

- How prepared residents are.
- Why residents don’t prepare.
- Who residents will rely on after a disaster.
- How informed residents are about what to do.
- Whether residents will follow their directions.

In addition, to allow us to link our findings with another DIEM project, “Revealed Preferences” (led by Sudipta Sarangi, LSU, in collaboration with Catherine Eckel, University of Texas at Dallas, and Rick Wilson, Rice University), we asked a set of questions based on hypothetical games to assess local officials’ relative valuation of risk over time. Finally, we asked a set of demographic questions to allow us to classify our respondents and their jurisdictions.
Survey Administration

Between and June 1, 2010 and October 16, 2010, a seventeen-minute telephone survey was administered to 816 local government officials. Computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) procedures were used to administer the questionnaire. The interviews were offered in English, and no incentive to participate was used. Respondents were offered the opportunity to receive a copy of the study results.

Respondent Profile

The 816 respondents range in age from 23 to 84 years old. About three-quarters (73%) are men. Most respondents (88%) are white; 3 percent are black. Respondents have worked in their current community from 1 to 65 years, with a mean of twelve years. Twenty six percent of the respondents identified themselves at democrats, thirty percent as republicans, and thirty-eight percent are independent. The average population size of sampled jurisdictions is 15,719, with a median of 4,448. Thirty-nine percent are rural (having populations less than 2,500). The median annual municipal operating budget (excluding education) for the respondent jurisdictions is $7 million, with a mean of about $28 million.
FINDINGS

Personal Attitudes Toward Risk

Local government officials were first asked to assess their own personal attitudes toward risk. Specifically, they were asked how prepared they are to take risks, and how well they are able to bounce back after something bad happens. Local officials generally view themselves as both prepared to take risks and resilient, as Figure 1 shows.

![Figure 1: Local Officials' Self-Perception Regarding Risk](image)

Figure 1. Responses to the questions: Are you generally a person who is fully prepared to take risks, or do you try to avoid taking risks? and, How would you rate your own personal ability to “bounce back” from when bad things happen, like losing your job, a bad accident, or some other unexpected disaster? (Figure shows mean scores on a scale of 0-10, where 0=Not at all and 10=Completely.)

Assessment of Community Risk and Preparedness

Local government officials across the country assess the risks facing the nation and their communities very similarly. They judge a financial disaster to be the most likely risk to the nation, and a nuclear disaster to be least likely, as Figure 2a shows. When asked to consider the full range of threats and hazards to their city or town and then identify the “biggest threat or hazard” to their community, an overwhelming majority named some type of major natural disaster, as Figure 2b illustrates.
Figures 2a and 2b. Responses to the questions: Which of the following do you think is the biggest risk facing our nation? and, Considering the full range of threats and hazards to your city or town, what do you think is the biggest threat or hazard that your city or town faces?

Note that, with respect to the community, Figure 2b represents almost 98 percent of valid responses. The remaining two percent of respondents reported threats like social problems (such as riots, crime, or drugs) and hazardous materials spills. In addition, 62 percent of the public officials who identified a natural disaster as the biggest risk to their community were very specific about what type of natural disaster risk worried them, and there were differences by region, as Figure 3 shows. Government leaders in the interior regions of the US are most concerned about tornadoes (42%) and flooding (33%), while coastal officials are most concerned about hurricanes (61%), followed by flooding (17%). Figure 4 then shows how likely local leaders think it is that the biggest threat their community faces will strike (roughly a 60% chance on average across all respondents), and how well they think their community can respond if that disaster were to occur (an average score of 7.72 on a 0-10 scale).
**Figure 3.** Natural disaster types local officials think pose the biggest risk to their communities.

**Figure 4.** Responses to the questions: How likely is it that this “biggest risk” would happen in your city or town? and, How ready is your city to respond if this “biggest risk” happened in your city or town today? (Figure shows mean scores on a scale of 0-10, where 0=Not at all and 10=completely.)
Local officials were asked to evaluate their jurisdictions’ overall preparedness for a major disaster. In general, local leaders see their jurisdictions as adequately or somewhat underprepared. Figure 5 shows that most leaders (56%) believe that their city or town is about as prepared as it needs to be. At the same time, 36 percent think that their communities are somewhat or much less prepared than they should be.

We also asked how long leaders think their jurisdictions can take care of themselves before they receive meaningful help from others, as well as how long they think it will take for such assistance to arrive. On average, local officials on the coast think that their communities can take care of themselves for about 14 days after a disaster, whereas local of the officials in the interior of the country think that their communities can make it on their own for about 17 days. On average local leaders in coastal communities expect it to take about 12 days before meaningful help from the federal government or other states arrives. Local leaders in the interior think it will take 18 days before they get meaningful outside help.

![Community Preparedness](chart.png)

*Figure 5. Response to the question: Overall, do you think your city or town is more prepared than it needs to be, less prepared than it needs to be, or as prepared as it needs to be, for a major disaster?*
Assessment of Preparedness Spending

The next set of questions asked local leaders to assess the adequacy of spending on disaster preparedness in their jurisdictions, and to compare this with spending on other community priorities. In general, just as most local government officials feel that their city or town is prepared “as well as it should be” for a major disaster, most (61%) also judge that disaster preparedness spending is “just about the right amount,” as Figure 6 shows. Overall, however, 37 percent of all local officials think their communities should be spending somewhat or much more on disaster preparedness than they do now. This is consistent with the fact that 36 percent think that their communities are less prepared than they should be (Figure 5, above). Notably, almost no one said that their community is spending more than it should be.

Figure 6. Responses to the question: Please think about the amount your city or town currently spends on disaster preparedness in comparison to spending on other things. Do you think your city or town should be spending more, should be spending less, or, is spending about the right amount, on disaster preparedness?

We then asked officials how they would prioritize spending on disaster preparedness as compared to other community priorities, and also how they think their taxpayers would prioritize spending on disaster preparedness. The results are shown in Figures 7a and b. Some leaders (28%) think taxpayers would make spending a lower priority than it is now.
**Figure 7a and b.** Responses to the question: If YOU/YOUR TAXPAYERS had sole discretion to decide the priority of disaster preparedness spending as compared to spending on other community priorities, would YOU/THEY make it a higher priority, a lower priority, or prioritize it about the same as it currently is?
When then asked the government officials how much of a $100 budget allocation for each resident’s disaster protection they would return to the resident so that they could spend it to protect themselves in the event of a disaster (as opposed to retaining the funds in the public budget for preparedness). Of all respondents, 33 percent would return nothing to their residents, while 6 percent would return the entire $100. The average amount that local officials said they would return to residents is just under $30. Figure 8 presents these findings.

Figure 8. Responses to the question: Imagine your city or town has $100 in your government budget to pay for protection of each resident in the event of a major disaster. You can choose to keep all of the money to provide protection for the resident, or, you can give back some or all of the money to the resident to protect themselves. How much of the $100 would you give back to the resident to spend on their own disaster protection?
To understand what, aside from resources, might impede community preparedness, we asked local officials about possible impediments to community preparedness. Over twenty percent of local leaders identified inadequate public education as the biggest barrier to improving disaster preparedness in their communities other than budget constraints. The barriers to better preparedness that local officials identified are shown in Figure 9.

**Figure 9. Responses to the question: Other than budget constraints, what is the biggest barrier to improving your city or town’s disaster preparedness? (Percent of all officials by barrier)**

**Assessment of Residents**

In order to better understand local government officials’ expectations about the people they are charged to protect—their residents—we asked them about to evaluate their residents’ preparedness, how they are likely to behave after a disaster, and how well they can recover. Overall, local officials see a quarter of their residents as very prepared, a quarter as somewhat prepared, a quarter as not very prepared, and a quarter as not at all prepared. Figure 10 shows that officials do, however, see residents as more informed than not (though coastal officials are
more sanguine about this than their interior counterparts). Similarly, coastal leaders think their residents understand the consequences of disaster better than interior leaders do. Local officials also think that residents are likely to follow directions, and that they are able to recover when disaster strikes, though this is more true for natural disasters than it is for terrorism.

Figure 10. Mean scores for responses to the questions: How well do you think the residents understand what the consequences would be if the “biggest risk” happened in your city or town? How likely is it that residents will follow directions given by you and your emergency response team when a major disaster happens in your city or town? How informed are your residents about what to do in the event of a major disaster? How well could the residents of your city or town recover from a terrorist attack? and, How well could the residents of your city or town recover from a major natural disaster (Figure shows mean scores on a scale of 0-10, where 0=Not at all and 10=Completely.)
We also asked local leaders who their residents would be most likely to rely on in a major disaster event. Local officials believe residents will rely most heavily on local responders such as police and fire personnel, and then on their city or town government, as Figure 11 shows.

**Figure 11.** Mean scores for responses to the questions: How much do you expect residents of your city or town to rely on each of the following in the event of a major disaster?

**Comparison of Local Public Officials and Citizens**

This section compares the risk perceptions, preferences, and preparedness assessments of local government officials to those of individual citizens measured through our 2009 national survey. The findings from the 2009 household survey are presented in a companion report, and can be found at: http://dpp.uconn.edu/faculty/donahue/publications.html.

To begin, both individuals and local government officials were asked about their own tolerance of risk. Specifically, they were asked about their resilience in terms of how well they think they
can bounce back after something bad happens to them, whether they accept or avoid risk, and whether they are willing to wait for rewards. These questions represent three distinct dimensions of tolerance for risk, as they are only very weakly correlated with each other. The results for individuals and local officials are shown at Figure 12 and Figure 13. Overall, local officials see themselves as more resilient, more prepared to take risks, and more patient than individual citizens judge themselves to be.

**Figure 12.** Responses to the questions: How would you rate your own personal ability to “bounce back” from when bad things happen, like losing your job, a bad accident, or some other unexpected disaster? and, Are you generally a person who is fully prepared to take risks, or do you try to avoid taking risks? (Figure shows mean scores and standard deviations on a scale of 0-10, where 0=Not at all and 10=completely.)

**Figure 13.** Index of responses to three choices: Winning $100 tomorrow or $120 in six months; winning $100 tomorrow or $150 in six months; winning $100 tomorrow or $200 in six months (mean scores, where 0=Always preferred immediate payment and 3=Always preferred future payment.)
Next, respondents in both groups were asked what they thought the biggest risks facing the nation and their communities are. The results are shown at Figures 14a and 14b. Here both local government officials and individuals see financial disaster at the biggest risk to the nation—not surprising given that these surveys were administered in the midst of the nations’ recent economic crisis—though many more officials than citizens see this as the biggest risk (40% versus 30%). Likewise, both local officials and individuals see a major natural disaster as the biggest threat to their own community, but again more officials than citizens see this as the biggest risk (79% versus 33%). In addition, more local officials see a major natural disaster as the biggest risk to the nation, while more citizens see a terrorist attack as the biggest threat. At the local level, almost all local officials judge a major natural disaster to be the biggest threat to their community, whereas a substantial proportion of citizens see financial disaster (29%) and a major disease epidemic (17%) as big threats. These results lend some support to the hypothesis that local officials differ from citizens in their assessments of risk.

*Figures 14a and 14b.* Responses to the questions: Which of the following do you think is the biggest risk facing our nation? (Officials & Individuals), and Which of the following do you think is the biggest risk facing your community? (Individuals) and, Considering the full range of threats and hazards to your city or town, what do you think is the biggest threat or hazard that your city or town faces? (Officials).
Several questions asked people to assess their own preparedness, and local officials to assess the preparedness of their citizens. Overall, individuals see themselves as more prepared than local officials think they are, as Figure 15 shows. Almost three quarters of individual respondents think they are very or somewhat prepared, while local officials think the proportion is more like half. Only eight percent of people admit they are not prepared at all, but local officials think many more people are unprepared (22%).

![Bar chart showing public officials vs. citizens comparison of how prepared people are.](image)

*Figure 15. Comparison of how local government officials assess the preparedness of their residents and how individual citizens assess their own preparedness.*
Figure 16 provides more detail about specific aspects of preparedness. In general, people think they can recover pretty well from a major natural disaster or terrorist attack (7.2 and 6.5 on a 0-10 scale), and local officials agree. On the other hand, people think they are better informed about what to do in the event of a disaster than local officials think they are (7.4 versus 6.2 on a 0-10 scale). Also, people think they are more likely to follow the directions local officials give them than local officials think they are (8.8 versus 7.6 on a 0-10 scale).

*Figure 16. Comparison of how local government officials assess the preparedness behavior and ability of their residents and how individual citizens assess their own behavior and ability. (Figure shows mean scores and standard deviations on a scale of 0-10, where 0=Not at all and 10=completely.)*
Finally, we asked people on whom they will rely for help after disaster strikes. Overwhelmingly, people said they would rely on themselves (9.1 on a 0-10 scale), while local officials expect people to rely on local emergency responders (8.6 on a 0-10 scale), as Figure 17 shows. Interestingly, both citizens and local officials think that people will rely least on state and federal agencies. Thus, in some respects local officials appear to differ from citizens in their assessments of preparedness.

**Figure 17.** Comparison of how much local government officials think their residents will rely on various entities after a disaster and how much individual citizens say they will rely on them (Figure shows mean scores and standard deviations on a scale of 0-10, where 0=Not at all and 10=completely.)
Finally, the 2009 survey asked individuals who said they had not done anything to prepare for a major natural disaster why they did not prepare, and local officials were asked why they think people don’t prepare. Figure 18 compares these responses. Half of citizens said the reason they don’t prepare is that they procrastinate—they know they should, but they haven’t gotten around to it (24.3%), or they are skeptical—they don’t think it is going to happen to them (23.5%). The top explanation local government officials give for why people don’t prepare is that people don’t think it is going to happen to them (35.1%). Many local government officials (20.4%) also agree that people procrastinate.

![Figure 18. Comparison of why local government officials think their residents don’t prepare and why individual citizens who say they have done nothing to prepare say they haven’t prepared.](image-url)
Local government officials (17.8%) also think that people think it takes too much time, effort, or money to prepare, though only eight percent of individuals gave this as the reason they don’t prepare. On the other hand, almost seventeen percent of individuals said they haven’t prepared because they don’t know what to do to prepare, whereas only nine percent of local government officials think this is the reason people don’t prepare. Likewise, over fourteen percent of individuals say they haven’t prepared because they would rather not think about bad things happening, but only about four percent of local government officials think this is the case. These findings offer mixed support for the notion that local government officials may misjudge why citizens act as they do. While local government officials correctly identify procrastination and skepticism as the main reasons people say they don’t prepare, they also tend to miss other important reasons people give for not preparing and incorrectly assume that people think preparedness is too expensive.
CONCLUSION

Overall, these findings suggest that local government officials and citizens diverge in terms of how they perceive risks and think about the domain of disaster preparedness. In some cases, the views of local government officials and public perceptions appear aligned. In general, these two groups identify similar risks, though their views of what is likely differ dramatically—almost eighty percent of local officials nationwide think that the biggest risk facing their city or town is a major natural disaster, whereas only one third of citizens think the biggest risk facing their community is a major natural disaster. They do have similar expectations about the support that will be forthcoming (or not) from state and federal agencies and nonprofit organizations, and about the prospects for their community’s ability to recover successfully from a disaster.

In other cases local government officials see citizens differently than citizens see themselves. Local government officials think people are less well-informed, less likely to take direction, less likely to be self-sufficient—indeed, less well prepared overall—than people think they are. Many more people think they are prepared than local officials think are prepared. Local officials also tend to attribute lack of preparedness to procrastination, denial, or stinginess, while citizens, who acknowledge putting off preparing, also feel like they don’t have the information they need and are uncomfortable focusing on the possibility of disaster. Local officials often reported being particularly concerned about elderly populations, who they worry don’t have the wherewithal to prepare adequately.

Even in instances where individual and local government officials have similar views, they may have different foundations. For example, a top reason people give for not preparing is that they don’t think it will happen to them. Local government officials also believe that this is why citizens don’t prepare, but view this as a state of denial on the part of citizens, rather than a rational assessment. In truth, citizens’ lack of preparedness—and lack of inclination to prepare—may be rational, given that disasters are relatively rare events in the experience of any particular person or jurisdiction. Further, the use of private insurance and implicit reliance on other forms of protection (such as local emergency responders) that insulate people from risk may create a moral hazard.

The fact that local government officials are sometimes incorrect about what citizens think does not mean that they are incorrect about citizens. The literature does show, for example, that people tend to over-estimate how prepared they are. Local government officials, who are less optimistic about how prepared citizens are, may also have a better sense of the reality of local preparedness. At the same time, this disconnect could help explain why preparedness
programs don’t seem to have had a profound influence on improved preparedness. In short, people act based on their perceptions, and so public policies must account for what people think and feel if they are to influence behavior.

There does appear to be room to invest more in preparedness. While a majority of officials think their jurisdictions are spending about the right amount on preparedness and are adequately prepared, a substantial minority think preparedness should be improved. While most local officials would continue to fund disaster preparedness at current levels, and most think their taxpayers would also maintain current funding, many (about a third) do think spending should be increased and would make it a higher priority if they could, though some think citizens would not support this. The results of the citizen survey show, however, that more than half of citizens nationwide say they would be willing to pay more for disaster preparedness.
NOTES


2. Redlener, I. et al. 2006. *Where the American Public Stands on Terrorism, Security, and Disaster Preparedness Five Years after September 11, One Year after Hurricane Katrina*. National Center for Disaster Preparedness (Mailman School of Public Health)/The Children’s Health Fund.


13 Redlener et. al., 2006.
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