



**AMERICAN
SOCIOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION**

NEWS

EMBARGOED: August 15, 2005, 12:00 am
Johanna Olexy or Lee Herring
(202) 247-9871
pubinfo@asanet.org

Disasters Do Not Necessarily Affect Minorities Disproportionately

Disaster Research Presented at the American Sociological Association Centennial Meeting

PHILADELPHIA, PA—While it has long been “known,” and often theorized, that individuals with fewer resources are more likely to suffer in a disaster—and it is true that the non-whites, the poor, and females often suffer more than their counterparts—the race-class-and-gender trinity of variables does not capture the entire spectrum in which disaster affects society. At the 2005 American Sociological Association Annual Meeting, Lee Clarke, Rutgers University, discusses the reality that calamity is with us as never before and yet we are poorly prepared.

“Too much disaster policy continues to take a command-and-control stance. And there’s been insufficient preparation where disasters really happen—at the local level: in offices, schools, trains, and the like,” says Clarke. “We are at greater risk for worst-case disasters today than in the past, even in wealthy societies. This is because of hubris, interdependence, and population concentration.

Clarke finds that people suffer and die in the same ways that they live—in patterned, nonrandom ways. There are patterns in where people choose to live, where they go to work, with whom they eat lunch, and with whom they spend their leisure time. His research concludes that because of that patterning, disasters in general and worst cases in particular can always be expected to damage some people disproportionately. His research stresses that disaster is a normal part of life.

In regards to the September 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, it is common to see enumerations of the many countries that were represented among the victims, which are used to show, incorrectly, says Clarke, that there were no patterns. But bond traders were differentially exposed to risk of death. The brokerage house of Cantor Fitzgerald lost about two-thirds of its 1,000 employees that morning. Probably few of those employees were poor and most were probably white, male, and financially well-off. He refers to this as inequities of the moment.

In disasters, “sometimes occupation matters, sometimes the kind of organization that you work for. Sometimes gender or race or class matters. Sometimes the inequality of the moment is geographically based,” says Clarke. “Once we see disaster and catastrophe, like death, misery, happiness, and boredom, as a normal part of life several things are thrown into perspective. We see that destruction happens in disasters in ways that are not random: there are patterns. These patterns tend to mirror the ways humans organize their societies: along lines of wealth and poverty, division of labor, access to health care, membership in organizations, to name a few.”

To obtain a copy of Clarke's paper, contact Johanna Ebner Olexy or Lee Herring at the ASA Press Office at (202) 247-9871, pubinfo@asanet.org or for more information on other ASA presentations, the meeting in general, or for assistance reaching researchers. Journalists are invited to attend all Annual Meeting events. During the meeting, press facilities will be located at the Philadelphia Marriott Hotel, (215) 409-4738.

Clarke's presentation is based on a chapter from his forthcoming book, *Worst Cases: Terror and Catastrophe in the Popular Imagination* (Fall 2005). Lee Clarke can be reached at (732) 445-5741 or lee@leeclarke.com. He will be in Philadelphia from August 12-16 at the Loews Philadelphia. At the meeting, he is to be awarded the ASA Environment and Technology section's Distinguished Contribution Award.

The searchable ASA Annual Meeting program and the PDF version of the preliminary program are posted on the meeting website at www.asanet.org/convention/2005/.

###

The American Sociological Association, currently celebrating its centennial year, is a non-profit membership association dedicated to serving sociologists in their work, advancing sociology as a science and profession, and promoting the contributions and use of sociology to society.