

Disaster Preparedness For Older Adults In Rural Communities



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Problem:

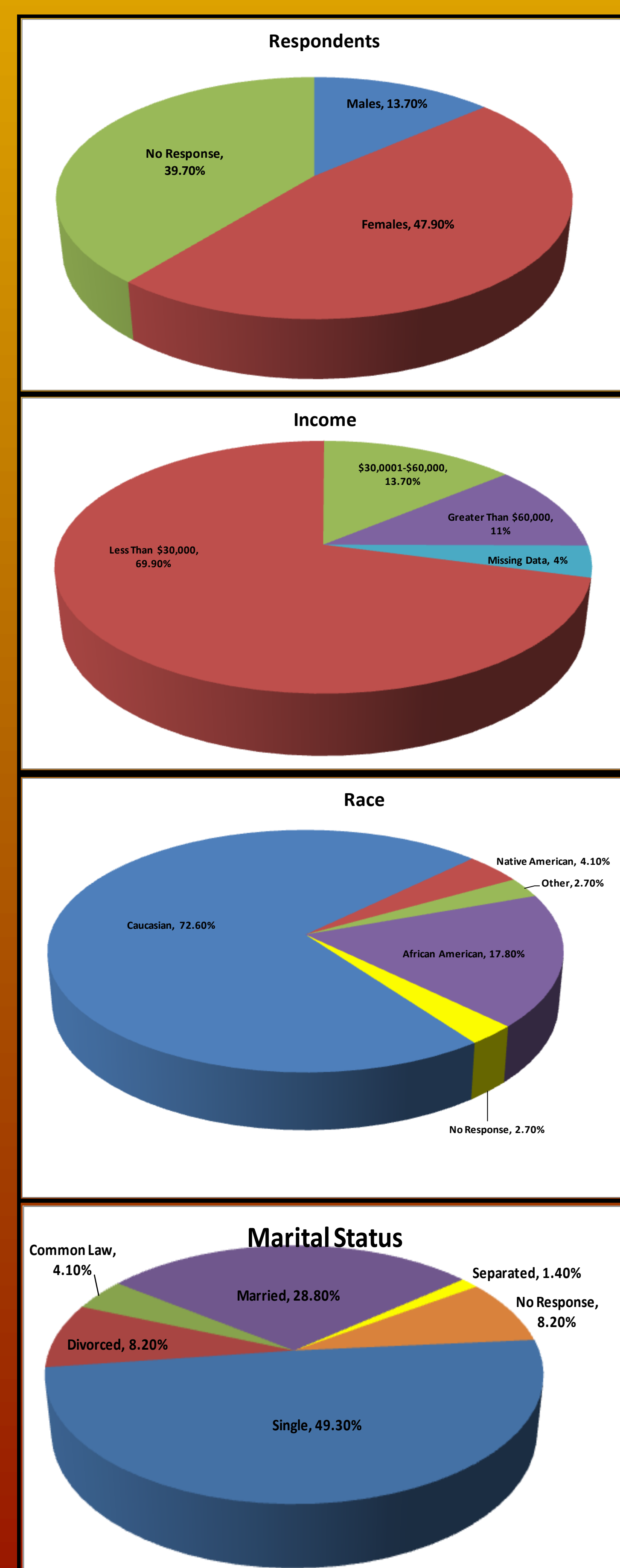
Disaster preparedness in target populations who are marginalized in terms of income is a phenomena that had attracted great interest since the Katrina experiences in LA. Despite this, people living in rural communities, who are older adults, will continue to be at risk due to the remote nature of rural communities. The purpose of this study was to examine how this target population living in rural communities perceive disasters, and to what level are they prepared.

Methods:

- Nine focus groups were conducted, using a schedule of seven questions, followed up with a survey instrument (MLEPS, Mulilis & Lippa, 1988).
- The MLEPS examined perceptions of difficulty for preparedness in the areas of planning, utility, knowledge and supply. Reliability coefficients reached for the MLEPS ranged from .68 to .97 for the preparedness items and .84 to .94 for the perceived difficulty measure.
- The sample (n=84) consisted of special populations characterized as low income, minority or elderly, and were solicited as volunteers through a local rural thrift store, food bank ministry or not-for profit agency all participated in focus groups.
- Six specific focus groups were conducted within three rural communities, with population bases ranging from 500 to 25,000.
- Focus group questions solicited responses related to perceptions of disasters, perceptions of community's action in case of a disaster, barriers to preparation and knowledge about disasters and family disaster planning.
- Variables included demographics, perception of readiness and perception of difficulty for preparedness.

Descriptive Statistics:

- Respondents within this study included 84 people who participated in a disaster preparedness program.
- Males represented 13.7% of the population, while 47.9% were females and 39.7% (no response) were missing from data.
- Respondents ranged in age from 60-88 years, while the mean age was 71.4 (sd =19.9).
- The majority 69.9% of the respondents made less than \$30,000, 13.7% made \$30,001-60,000, 11% made over 60,000, while 4% were missing from the data.
- The majority of respondents, (72.6%), were Caucasian, 17.8% were African American, 4.1% were Native American, 2.7 % identified themselves as other and 2.7% did not respond.
- In terms of marital status, nearly half (49.3%) of the respondents were single, 28.8% were married, 8.2% were divorced, 4.1% were common law, 1.4% was separated and 8.2% did not respond.



Focus Group Findings:

- Respondents identified the top three types of disaster to include tornados, floods and earthquakes.
- Over half of the respondents did not have disaster kits prepared or available. More than one third of respondents (34.8%) felt that a disaster would not happen to them, while other barriers included time and finances.
- Older adults want to be prepared to evacuate, but find transportation to be a problem.

Survey Responses:

- There was no significant difference between gender and disaster preparedness (paired t-test). Males and females were equally not prepared or prepared.
- There were not significant differences between age groups, gender or income in areas of planning, knowledge, utility or supply with the exception of one item. Older adults did not fare out any differently than any other age group.
- There was a significant difference between income level and having items to be prepared, including batteries and flashlights ($t=3.56, df=3, p=.04$). If an older adult had more resources, they were more likely to have batteries and flashlights.

Conclusion:

- Findings suggest that older adults are not prepared in case of a disaster and also the lower the income level, the less prepared people are.
- Older adults may know that they need specific provisions, however income plays a role in acquiring items necessary in preparation.

Discussion:

- Participants could benefit from a community resource which maintains a repository of documents and emergency preparedness kits for people that are low income. People in this target group have a difficult time organizing themselves for the most part, thus a community resource which can help people within this target group organize would be an asset.
- Programming has raised people's awareness about the need for preparedness. Although people may not have been prepared to the extent that we would like, programming definitely moved people to a different place than where they were prior to programming.
- Participants were interested in learning how to be prepared. They seemed to think that being prepared is a good idea, but at the same time they didn't want to face the reality that a disaster could actually happen in their community. They often joked and made light of what they might do in the situation.
- Older adults had experienced a number of disasters in their lifetimes and aware of the need, but due to multiple other issues, unprepared.



Implications:

- Educational interventions targeting information and preparation for low income groups will be an essential first step in the preparation process for disasters. In addition, community based agencies may need to consider alternatives to personal preparation, and assist low income communities to develop community preparation plans.
- These findings also suggest the need for further exploratory work through survey strategies targeting people that frequent resources such as food banks, pantries and thrift stores.
- Although it appears that planning does not appear to be different regardless of class nor age, it does appear that structural and resource opportunities are very different. People in lower income brackets may not have the resources to maintain emergency preparedness kits, nor have the resources to leave the area if need be in the wake of a disaster.
- Findings suggest the need for community members to be aware of where older adults may be residing, and take necessary steps to assure that they are safe when subjected to disasters.
- Efforts to include older adults in the planning for First Responder and Disaster response teams can greatly improve the development and delivery of intervention efforts to reach older adults.
- Some of the traditional strategies identified in terms of listing resources and assets useful during the time of disaster (i.e. chainsaws etc.) may not be realistic within neighborhoods with lower incomes due to fear of theft and gangs. Alternative strategies may be necessary to develop with people who are coming from lower income groups who are older adults.

Post script to study:

On May 8th, the area within which this study was conducted was hit by an “inland hurricane”, which was preceded by strong rains for nearly one week. Since the ground was soft, the winds swept up trees, resulting in significant damage to the homes of older adults. Although these older adults may not have had power nor food rations, neighbors with power generators and cooking facilities were able to take in these older adults and give them both food and shelter. Regardless of socio-economic areas, the result was the same—that is people who were older adults were looked after and given food/shelter by neighbors.

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