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## Partnerships and Collaboration: Working Together to Build and Achieve Disaster Recovery

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## Abstract

On May 22, 2011, an EF-5 tornado struck Joplin, Missouri, leaving behind 161 fatalities and \$2.8 billion in economic impacts. This case study research design used in-depth semi-structured, one-on-one interviews and a qualitative design and analysis to examine the economic recovery following the disaster. It also formed the foundation for future research on the impact of interdisciplinary teams, specifically disaster emergency management and social work in disaster recovery.

**Keywords:** Joplin, disaster recovery, recovery policy, population loss and disaster, interdisciplinary teams

## Introduction

Disaster occurrences are growing both in the United States and globally, and they are affecting more populated areas. As a consequence of the growing rates of disasters and damages, the economic losses from disasters are growing. Research indicates that economic losses from disasters represented 60 percent of global economic losses from 1991 to 2005 (Villie de Goyett & Griekspoor, 2007). More recent research regarding economic losses from global disasters shows that such losses continue to grow; in 2017, \$306 billion in economic losses were incurred globally from natural and man-made disasters, which represented a 63 percent increase from 2016, and is higher than the previous ten-year average (McCarthy, 2017). The global economic impact in 2018 reached \$160 billion; while less than 2017, it is still above the overall yearly loss average of \$140 billion, and 2018 was the fourth costliest year on record since 1980 (Low, 2019). While economic losses garner attention, overlooking the impact of these disasters on survivors' mental and emotional health is not uncommon.

The natural disaster that is the focus of this case study is the EF-5 tornado that struck the city of Joplin on May 22, 2011. This disaster led to 161 fatalities and 1,000 injuries within Joplin, damaged or destroyed 7,500 homes, and damaged or destroyed 531 businesses and other organizations. This event was the most economically damaging tornado in history, with final damage and cost impacts of \$2.8 billion, and the deadliest single tornado event on record since 1950 (Johnston, 2018).

## Literature Review

There have been arbitrary uses of policy, and alterations to policy, in certain disaster occurrences to help spur post-disaster recovery. Still, there appears to be no uniform and automatic channels geared toward ensuring that local and regional economies will bounce back following a disaster occurrence. New information, policy ideas, and lessons learned can potentially reduce economic disaster losses and address survivors' mental and emotional needs. The emotional needs of survivors include psychological distress from the event itself and displacement and loss of community (Wong, 2018). Grief, loss, and trauma can take on many forms and have the potential to lead to long-term mental health issues. The sooner these issues are identified and treated, the better the treatment outcomes (Schnyder & Cloitre, 2015). Lessons learned from the Joplin tornado event and other disaster events reveal that recovery from a disaster (physical, financial, and mental) often requires collaboration and partnerships. However, as Mitchell (2006) states, "in recent decades, the notion of partnership has become deeply embedded in the hazard's community (emergency management), and it is now commonly accepted enough that policymaking and [disaster] management should involve representation of all so-called stakeholders" (p. 236).

For example, Hurricane Katrina revealed the importance of public-private partnerships during disaster response and recovery, among many other lessons learned. In general, the private sector, companies like Walmart, Lowe's, and others, respond to disasters more efficiently and effectively than the government (Swanson & Smith, 2013, p. 335). In many disaster cases, the logistical needs during natural disasters have outpaced the capacity of what the public sector can provide (Swanson & Smith, 2013, p. 335). However, further research is needed still to expand public-private partnerships (PPPs) beyond the contexts in which they are typically thought of and to include PPP and other types of collaboration in processes that address response and recovery issues that emerge in the aftermath of a disaster occurrence (Swanson & Smith, 2013 p. 335). Given the increases in disaster losses discussed above, one of the most pressing challenges that many governments now face is the need to increase communities' resilience and increase the ability to respond effectively and recover from disasters (Swanson & Smith, 2013).

Recovery from disaster is the process by which a disaster-affected community restores order and moves past the preoccupations of the disaster itself (Mitchell,

2006, p. 236). On May 22, 2011, an EF-5 tornado struck the city of Joplin, Missouri. Joplin, Missouri is a city in southwest Missouri with a population of 51,762 as of the 2021 Census and approximately 240,000 during the day; the population within a 40-mile radius of Joplin is 400,000, making it Missouri's fourth-largest metropolitan area (Census, 2021; Joplin, 2016). The purpose of this study is twofold, 1) to examine if best practices were used and were successful in economic recovery in Joplin, MO, following an EF-5 tornado on May 22, 2011, and 2) to explore the need for interdisciplinary teams, specifically disaster emergency management and social work, in disaster recovery efforts.

### **Research Method**

The data underlying this research were obtained through a qualitative exploratory case study of the 2011 Joplin, Missouri, tornado disaster. For this study, recovery was defined as Joplin returning to, at a minimum, the economic and other conditions that existed pre-disaster. The primary method of obtaining the data utilized in this study was through one-on-one interviews conducted and recorded with the Zoom video conferencing platform within the context of a case study. In this study, purposive selection of the participants was used to select individuals that were directly affected by or involved in the disaster and recovery processes that followed. Selection was not based on a specific gender, ethnicity, race, or socioeconomic status. No individuals were discriminated against or disallowed to participate based on any protected classifications. Individuals included were 18+ years of age at the time of the event occurrence in 2011 and provided signed informed consent before their participation. Individuals were excluded from participation if they were unable to provide informed consent, if they were not directly involved with the disaster and/or recovery processes in Joplin, if they felt answering the questions would cause undue harm to themselves or others, or if the information they were providing may have been perceived as being unreliable.

The sample size in Joplin was determined by the number and types of entities directly involved in the disaster and recovery process to ensure that all possible viewpoints were covered and considered, ensuring a proper sample size and saturation of the population. Participants for the study were identified by searching governmental and organizational websites, documents, and the literature. Participant outreach for the semi-structured interviews was conducted between February and May 2019. Through the course of the outreach, twenty-six

individuals representing the government for the city of Joplin, public primary, secondary, and post-secondary educational institutions, healthcare institutions, private businesses, religious organizations, and the Joplin Area Chamber of Commerce were contacted. Data from in-depth interviews were collected from seven participants associated with Joplin's disaster and recovery through video conferencing software. After the interviews were conducted, transcribed, and reviewed for accuracy by the participants, they were coded and analyzed to determine the reoccurring themes from the participants about how law and policy related to disaster recovery following the 2011 Joplin disaster.

### Findings

The six *subordinate* themes that emerged from the data in regard to the *superordinate* theme of the collaboration for recovery are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1**

Theme of Collaboration for Recovery

<i>Subordinate Theme 1</i>	MOUs
<i>Subordinate Theme 2</i>	Public/private partnerships
<i>Subordinate Theme 3</i>	Public/private funding
<i>Subordinate Theme 4</i>	Relationships
<i>Subordinate Theme 5</i>	Research of previous disasters and lessons learned
<i>Subordinate Theme 6</i>	Strong local leadership

First, across disciplines, several participants in the case study mentioned that memorandums of understanding (MOUs) and mutual aid agreements were important pieces of the response and recovery puzzle following the Joplin disaster. In addition, policy alterations were made in order to ensure that aid was available for the response and recovery processes. For example, entities mentioned MOUs and agreements for sheltering after the disaster, as well as the need for agreements to move human resources across state lines following an event, including those for

medical, law enforcement, and public works projects. Table 2 provides relevant quotes from the data that support the subordinate theme of MOUs.

**Table 2**

Subordinate Theme of MOUs

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“Signed a memorandum with the Red Cross that we would serve as a shelter site.”

“[The state] changed some of the rules and regulations that make it easier for medical personnel to move from, across state jurisdictional boundaries in these kinds of situations.”

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Second, partnerships between the public and private sectors were key to ensuring that certain entities were able to continue their mission and recover following the disaster. This theme was especially noteworthy in the education arena, where partnerships allowed the continuation of school functions while the district recovered. Table 3 provides relevant quotes from the data that support the subordinate theme of public/private partnerships.

**Table 3**

Subordinate Theme of Public/Private Partnerships

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“We ended up with a school in the Joplin mall, we ended up with a 90,000-square foot box store to have the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade campus.”

“We negotiated with [a] company to let that building go and let the school rent the building, I believe to house the middle school.”

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Third, not only did public and private partnerships emerge as important pieces, funding from both public and private sources were required to recover. While governmental, nonprofit programs, and funding streams were critical for recovery, private capital and insurance policies were critical pieces of the economic recovery puzzle for many entities. Table 4 provides relevant quotes from the data that support the subordinate theme of public/private funding.

**Table 4**

Subordinate Theme of Public/Private Funding

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“We had good insurance, but we worked very closely with FEMA and those folks as we put things together.”

“We are fortunate to be part of Mercy [Health System], so we had some access to capital...or would have had to wait to see what FEMA was going to do, or personal insurance might do.” Business interruption [insurance] was huge.”

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Fourth, the terms collaboration and relationship emerged across the spectrum of participants. Relationships and knowing whom to contact and where to go both prior to the disaster, during the response, and during the recovery were essential in contributing to the recovery that Joplin experienced after the disaster. Table 5 provides relevant quotes from the data that support the subordinate theme of relationships.

**Table 5**

Subordinate Theme of Relationships

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Planning with the city and county...what are the next steps?”

“We hired [a private consultant] to make sure we got through the FEMA paperwork correctly.”

“A group out of one of the universities in Texas...flew up on their own dime and jumped in and helped us navigate some of those pieces.”

“One thing that enhanced our ability to recover was our ability to use community development block grants for our new early childhood center [collaboration between the school district and the city].” “Relationships were key in enabling to help with the expedited recovery that we saw.”

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Fifth, utilizing lessons learned from previous disasters and actively researching the recovery processes from previous disasters were key components of recovery in the context of Joplin. In utilizing lessons learned and researching previous events, community leaders across the board in Joplin were able to utilize best

practices in their recovery, take what worked and what did not work in previous events, and apply it to their current situations. Table 6 provides relevant quotes from the data that support the subordinate theme of research of previous disasters and lessons learned.

**Table 6**

Subordinate Theme of Research of Previous Disasters and Lessons Learned

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“Four or five other people had been through this with other communities that we ended up using as consultants.”

“HUD officials...were planting a seed to some of the incredible amounts of money those other disasters...received...and that served as the basis for the request that I made of the federal government for assistance.”

“Research on how other cities handled their disasters...some of the mistakes and missteps that maybe they made that we could avoid...”

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Finally, strong local leadership emerged as a final theme for the recovery collaboration. There is a misconception that "others" will do all of the work during the recovery processes from a disaster, and that is not the case; it is a partnership that is built on strong foundations at each of levels in the process. Table 7 provides relevant quotes from the data that support the subordinate theme of strong local leadership.

**Table 7**

Subordinate Theme of Strong Local Leadership

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“The number three guy [from FEMA] came into see me and said, we’re only as good as what we find when we get on the scene.”

“[FEMA] we can’t supplant local leadership, which is what some people expect, but we can build on what’s there.”

“FEMA’s efforts were so successful because there was sound leadership in place...as opposed to the expectation that they would do the work.”

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## Discussion

The overall themes that emerged from this case study included having collaboration for recovery, disparities in policy, and policy adaptability and flexibility being key in ensuring recovery. In addition to preventing population losses (persons deciding not to rebuild and opting to move), all the actions taken in any area post-disaster seemed to support the central theme of preventing citizens and business owners from moving away. Policies and actions taken that were geared toward ensuring that the population of Joplin did not decline during the recovery, as they did in such places as Greensburg, KS, and New Orleans, LA, were key in ensuring that recovery was able to take place following the tornado. The population supported the businesses and tax base in Joplin and ensured that revenue streams continued and helped the community move forward. While specific policy measures are to be developed through future research, policy areas that were critical to preventing losses in the context of Joplin were those that focused on acquiring short- and long-term housing solutions, continuity of business operations, to include payroll continuation for affected employees regardless of working status, and agreements to continue services vital to the community, including educational operations.

In the case of Joplin, if policies and programs were not in place to prevent population losses following a disaster or, at the very least existing policies were not flexible enough to prevent population losses following a disaster, then affected areas would lose population numbers and economics, and recovery would be inhibited or stalled. The people of a community are the heart of the economy, and without them, the financial processes of a community will not continue functioning. Policy and post-disaster actions should ensure that individuals have access to post-disaster housing, capital, and finances that will allow them to stay in the community post-disaster.

The implications for practice from this case study of the 2011 Joplin tornado disaster are limited since case study research is rarely generalizable beyond the context of the particular case being studied. However, while this case study and its findings cannot be generalized to the broader realm of disaster occurrences outside the context of the 2011 Joplin tornado, it does lay the groundwork for future research and potential findings that can be generalized to the broader population. It is suggested that the data and findings from this case study research can be utilized to build a quantitative survey that can be distributed to multiple

jurisdictions that have experienced disasters and losses in order to determine what factors in policies and programs affected their recovery. Future research will hopefully yield results that are generalizable, and that can be used to determine if policy and program changes are needed in the realm of disaster economic recovery.

### **Study Implications and Future Research**

Findings from the current study support the need for partnership and collaboration in the disaster recovery process; however, the primary focus of this study was on economic recovery, but emotional and mental health recovery must also be addressed. Mental health treatment and social service are often seen as stand-alone recovery modalities, but both have shown success in collaborating with disaster recovery managers and teams (Bauwens & Naturale, 2017). Disaster management and recovery as a whole must be individualized for the specific disaster, but there must be an overall plan of execution. Bauwens and Naturale (2017) propose that the mental health component of disaster recovery should be part of this overall plan. It is possible that social workers as mental health providers in disaster recovery may have been overlooked in the past due to the immediate need for disaster recovery.

However, organizations like the American Red Cross have utilized social workers for years, and much of their social work service delivery is centered on mental health treatment in times of disasters. Bauwen and Naturale (2017) state, “social workers have the potential to bring a unique understanding to the disaster field by underscoring the values of our profession and giving attention to oppressed and disadvantaged populations” (p. 99).

Natural disasters do not discriminate; however, those who are already vulnerable often have a more challenging task with recovery. Howard, et al (2018) argue that social work as a profession is already designed to assist in all stages of disaster management, including preparedness. Disaster risks could be incorporated into intake assessment in social service agencies/organizations.

Similarly, Hay and Pascoe (2018) state that social workers already possess the skills and training that make them "well situated to effectively contribute to emergency management" (p. 3). Collaboration between social workers and emergency management has the potential to not only enhance disaster recovery efforts but to better prepare vulnerable population before disasters occur.

## Conclusion

The global impact of natural disasters continues to rise. While the focus on impact is often on economics, as it is a quantifiable measurement, physical and mental injuries can have even more prolonged effects on individuals in the disaster area. Emergency management and social work have their specialties, but a collaboration of the two can mitigate the impact of disasters. Disaster management and recovery is multi-disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and requires a whole community approach to be successful and return communities and lives to pre-disaster conditions. With our continued heavy reliance on the government to respond to disasters, gaps continue to exist in response to many disasters, with resources and capabilities being quickly overwhelmed in the largest of these events (FEMA, 2011). A holistic approach, as discussed here, can close gaps, build disaster resilient communities, and improve post-disaster outcomes for disaster survivors.

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