
Local governments play a key role in emergency management by developing the necessary policies and concrete procedures for responding effectively to community emergencies and their aftermath. However, because emergency measures in most jurisdictions are rarely, if ever, activated, public managers find it difficult to evaluate and assess the quality of existing emergency management programs. Drawing on expert literature to identify 30 elements of a high-quality local emergency management program, key elements are refined and synthesized into a single framework that provides clear-cut best practices for emergency program evaluation and performance measurement.

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina devastated communities along the U.S. Gulf Coast. Although the size of the hurricane was extraordinary, much of the destruction and human suffering was attributed to a failure of governments to adequately plan for a large-scale emergency of this kind (U.S. Senate 2006; Waugh 2006). Disasters like Hurricane Katrina periodically emphasize the critical importance of emergency management, which involves detailed planning and organization to deal with emergencies and their impacts. Local governments play a key role in emergency management, assessing threats to public safety, identifying points of vulnerability, and ensuring that resources can be mobilized for an effective response and swift recovery.

But because emergencies occur infrequently, emergency plans in most jurisdictions are rarely, if ever, activated. Although desirable from a public safety standpoint, the absence of emergency experience makes it difficult for public managers to evaluate emergency management programs and to measure performance in this field. The quality of a local government’s emergency planning largely determines the effectiveness of its response efforts when disaster strikes, but under normal conditions, politicians, administrators, and citizens appear to lack specific criteria by which to assess community performance in this area.

This essay offers a framework for evaluating local government emergency management programs. It begins by briefly introducing the policy field of emergency management, which involves courses of action to prevent, prepare for, respond to, and recover from emergencies. It then draws on expert literature to identify elements of a high-quality local emergency management program. Finally, these individual program elements are refined and combined in a table, which provides a tool to assist local governments in measuring performance in this area.

Emergency Management

Emergencies are triggered when hazards, such as a floods, train derailments, or industrial accidents, interact with vulnerabilities—physical, social, economic, and environmental conditions—that make a community susceptible to hazards (McEntire 2001; Paton and Johnston 2001). Sometimes an emergency causes such widespread social and economic impacts that it exceeds the coping capacity of a community, and this is referred to as a disaster. The tremendous problems caused by emergencies and disasters demand plans and procedures to mitigate hazards, reduce vulnerability, and cope with the impacts of emergencies.

Public policies designed to meet these objectives are typically aggregated under the rubric of emergency management, but they can be conceptually