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About this Special Issue on Libraries and Disasters

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About this Special Issue on Libraries and Disasters

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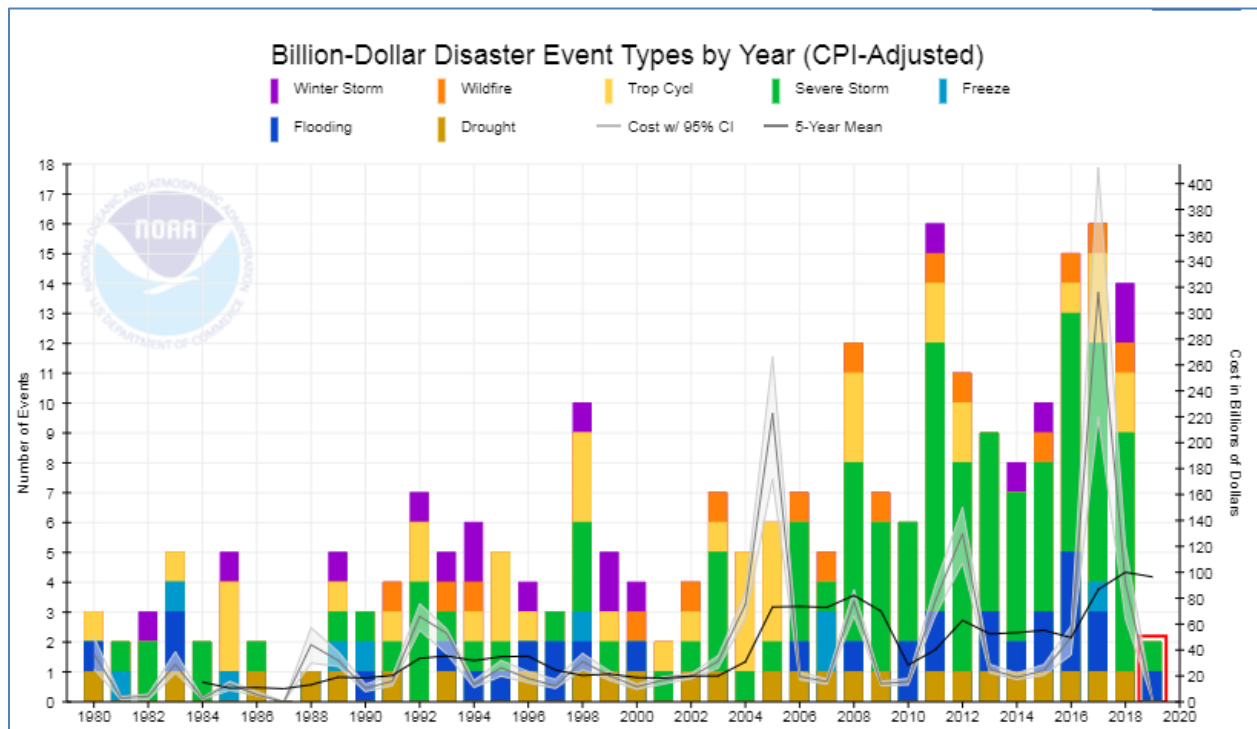
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In this issue, we take an expansive look at the important role public libraries play in their communities when disaster strikes. Some of the articles are what you might expect to find in a special issue devoted to this topic but we also go beyond where you might expect because our communities are facing a broad range of threats like “100-year” weather events that happen with more frequency, domestic terrorism that makes our children and public institutions targets, and an increasingly divided populace stoked by income inequality, racism, xenophobia, and religious extremism.

So, in taking on the topic of the role of public libraries in disasters, we haven’t limited our scope very much.

Extreme weather events have increased in frequency and intensity offering everyone plenty of opportunities to improve how best to prepare and respond to them. It is slowly becoming obvious to disaster preparedness officials that libraries need to be at the disaster planning table.



Source: NOAA National Centers for Environmental Information (NCEI) U.S. Billion-Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters (2019). <https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/billions/>



Ayre: About This Special Issue

The opportunities and challenges for public libraries vis-à-vis emergency and disaster planning is well-documented by Veil and Bishop.¹ Until fairly recently, libraries have reacted to natural disasters as best they could. That has often meant providing a safe haven in the storm, a place of respite and a gathering place. Michele Stricker describes the critical role libraries played in 2012 after Hurricane Sandy hit the East Coast. She describes the lessons learned from that experience and provides insights from the Librarian's Disaster Planning and Community Resiliency Toolkit prepared by the New Jersey State Library. The toolkit is designed to help libraries be better prepared to "accept the mantle of responsibility being thrust on them as a safe haven in times of crisis." Michele provides many suggestions for how libraries can prepare for the next disaster, and help during and after disasters. And she provides practical advice how to get involved with disaster planning in your community.

Since 2012, more libraries have succeeded at formalizing their relationships with emergency response planners in their communities. To understand what that means, we hear from two libraries that have official "disaster jobs" and what they ended up doing when disaster struck their communities. Adam Davis and Chris Jankow of Palm Beach County Library describe the hugely successful pilot project that assigned two library staff to the Emergency Operations Center and the additional roles that library staff took on during Hurricane Irma in 2017. Jen Lemberger, of Santa Barbara Public Library, begins her story in 2017 when the Thomas Fire broke out. In Santa Barbara, all full-time library staff are also designated as emergency service workers. She describes how the term "other duties as assigned" became much more real as library staff fulfilled their emergency service roles during the fire, after the fire and then again during the devastating mudslides that followed the fire. Even today, their emergency response work continues

with targeted programming to help their community mentally and financially and to make sure everyone is ready for the next fire season.

Although we are focusing largely on public libraries, we couldn't resist sharing the story of the Disaster Information Management Resource Center (DIMRC). DIMRC opened in 2008 arising from a mandate at the National Library of Medicine. The organization develops and curates health information needed for disaster preparedness, response and recovery. The mandate includes natural disasters and accidents as well as anthropogenic disasters with chemical, biological and radiological components. Stacy Arnesen and Florence Chang describe how DIMRC got started and what the organization is doing today. They also describe the Disaster Information Specialist certificate program designed to get more information professionals into disaster response roles.

Jim Craner looks at the mapping and GIS tools that can be put to use before, during, and after a disaster. These tools could be used by staff or could be made available by the library for other community partners as part of a coordinated effort to get prepared.

The above articles tell a similar story: libraries and library staff have unique skills and resources that need to be incorporated into every community's disaster response planning. If your City or County emergency planning group doesn't have library representation yet, it may be up to you to make it happen. Hopefully, these articles will help make your argument for getting involved.

For the other types of disasters, the role of the public library and librarians is less established. In these cases, we provide a librarian perspective in hopes that we can move these conversations along.



Ayre: About This Special Issue

Renate Chancellor argues that just as libraries are there for their communities during a natural disaster, they also need to be there during civil unrest. Her article explores our nation's and our profession's history of racism and challenges the traditional definition of "neutrality." She argues instead for engagement when our communities are in the midst of social turmoil in order to provide a safe space. With civil unrest becoming a part of our everyday life, "silence or neutrality on critical issues facing communities is not prudent, nor is it consistent with advocacy and activism that the library profession experienced historically."

Ashley Manor explores the phenomenon of grief archives and the importance of the physical objects that survive a tragedy. Her piece, an autoethnography, begins with her experience of the Virginia Tech campus shooting in 2007. She explores the value of remembrance as well as the need to sometimes forget. She also addresses the personal toll that archiving a tragedy can

take on those responsible for preserving those memories and artifacts.

The opioid epidemic is a new disaster affecting our communities and library staff again have a role to play. Michele Coleman and Lynn Silipigni Connaway describe a new OCLC research project that hopes to find effective strategies for libraries to employ in tackling this disaster.

They will share case studies and preliminary findings. They will be contributing to this journal again at the conclusion of their work.

And finally, Carol Frost shares her thoughts on the importance of listening and finding the win-win in her editorial on what collaboration means to her.

I hope you'll find this special issue instructive, inspirational and thought-provoking. These are challenging times for libraries. Everything is changing - the weather, our democracy, and what it means to be a librarian. But our communities need us more than ever. I hope we are able to continue to rise to the challenge.

¹ Veil, Shari R. and Bishop, Bradley Wade (2014). Opportunities and Challenges for Public Libraries to Enhance Community Resilience, *Risk Analysis*, v34, n4, 2014. DOI: 10.1111/risa.12130.