What is Rural EM?

Is rural emergency management really any different than urban emergency management? This question has been asked of me more than once after the creation of the Institute for Rural Emergency Management. Obviously, I thought there was something to study, but what would I need to find to prove it to others? Is there evidence of differences? Is it merely a quantitative difference where urban is large and population dense, and rural is smaller and less populated? Would this inquiry begin with a better understanding of rural? A decade later with a PhD in Rural Sociology I have discovered that there is no universal definition of rural and it means different things to different folks.

Is rural a characteristic of a place, a person, or a social group? Places are often designated as rural for what they are not; non-metropolitan is the census designation for the areas outside of metropolitan areas that show a population density below a defined number of people per square mile. Rural places might be characterized by the economic activity or value; agriculture, mining, timber, ranching, recreation, conservation, wilderness or deserts. People may be considered rural because they live in a rural place, have an accent, choose a lifestyle, or dress in a particular fashion. Ruralness may be associated with membership in certain groups; agricultural workers, cowboys, volunteer firefighters and farmers. What makes something or someone rural can be cultural or activity, as much as location. Additionally, there are some organizational attributes of rural places that create a different environment for emergency management.

Rural emergency management is essentially a multi-organizational network composed of local independent organizations with a common goal of serving and protecting the community. Relationships are key to understanding how the network functions. Theories seek to explain these relationships: network theory, organizational theory, and community theory offer explanations that help to describe why rural emergency management is different from non-rural emergency management.

Network theory contributes three concepts that you may recognize or that you may find in your experience; **multiplicity, reciprocity, and cognition**. **Multiplicity** of networks is evident when my family network, friend network, work network, church network, and club networks overlap in multiple ways. The organizations active in emergency management have member networks that overlap when volunteer firefighters are also part-time Emergency Medical Technicians, and deputy sheriffs. Multi-organizational membership is common in rural communities and **multiplicity** increases when those organizations are also populated by members of your family. **Reciprocity**, when you can expect help in return when you give it, is a hallmark of rural life. In the emergency management world, we rely upon mutual aid to have sufficient resources to supplement understaffed and underequipped organizations, and the mutual aid is primarily local. **Cognition** is a network concept that we should all be expanding. It is essentially the awareness that we are part of a network. Awareness that the network exists enhances the function of the network, so pay attention to your networks.

Organizational theory affirms the importance of **membership** and the identity associated with being a member. **Multi-organizational membership** has often been associated with negative effects on organizational commitment and increasing numbers of non-rural emergency services organizations restrict or prohibit it. Resource limitations, particularly human resources, make it necessary for everyone to use their knowledge and skills to staff multiple rural organizations. This cross organizational activity has a description – **boundary spanning**. Organizations that share members with other organizations share a resource that strengthens both organizations and can provide unanticipated efficiencies and resilience.

Community theory clarifies that **interdependence** strengthens social bonds and trust. The culture exemplifies common goals, traditions, and values. The organizations in the emergency management network share **cultural** attributes. Community is not merely a place; it is an **emergent** connectedness among people who are in proximity to each other. Rural community happens when we belong to each other.

Observing and identifying these attributes of organizational relationships gleaned from these theoretical origins is the ultimate test of whether they are true or not. Your knowledge and experience in rural emergency management is the testing ground. I chose to examine the **4 C’s of Emergency Management** that are often mentioned and described in the emergency management literature; **Communication, Coordination, Cooperation**, and **Collaboration**. There are characteristics of organizational relationships that are necessary ingredients (**antecedents**) to **communication** described by each theoretical source, and these ingredients are also necessary for **coordination**, and for **cooperation** and for **collaboration**. The question for our discussion today: Which of the 4 C’s comes first, **Coordination** or **Cooperation**?

I would like to invite each of you to contribute to the description and understand of rural emergency management. Please consider contributing to the Journal of Rural Emergency Management.

Why a journal for rural emergency management? The goal is to share what we each have learned and experienced that can help us to understand the rural experience and the possibility of rural resilience. You can respond to my comments today and write a letter to the editor, submit a case study of an incident, a research paper, or a link to an online resource that might be useful to others. This is an opportunity to make a contribution as a practitioner or observer of rural emergency management.

Thank you for your attention and your interest in rural emergency management. I look forward to learning from you.

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