



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

CORRECTIONS

Inmate safety and emergency preparedness

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The recent prison fire in Honduras that engulfed and killed more than 350 inmates who were unable to escape their locked and crowded barracks may have occurred in a faraway land where life is cheap and human rights are few, but such tragedies are waiting to happen much closer to home.

With the high level of disregard and disdain that so many US citizens have for criminals secured away in our state prisons and county jails, few ever consider the plight of prisoners in the face of disaster, be it sudden or foreseen.

Consider the lessons (sort of) learned from the events associated with Hurricane Katrina in 2005. With Katrina aiming straight for New Orleans, the Louisiana Department of Corrections welcomed to various inland facilities some 700 inmates from jails in parishes projected to endure the brunt of the storm. The St. John and Plaquemines parish prisons, among others, were emptied to ensure the safety of those under correctional care.

Not so for the Orleans Parish Prison, a massive institution housing 6,500 inmates, which made it the nation's ninth-largest jail. Apparently, the sheriff deemed it unnecessary to transfer the inmates, despite strong encouragement from the governor and other officials for everyone to evacuate.

Americans watched in dismay as the Superdome was transformed into a prison, as it was characterized by one angry resident marooned for days without sufficient water, food or sanitation. But the media were virtually silent about a different class of prisoners - the actual ones locked in cells at the mercy of elected officials making an arbitrary decision about whether to evacuate.

Following the storm, as flood waters rose within the Orleans jail, inmates were more in the dark than almost anyone. They too lacked sufficient food and water, yet couldn't scavenge for sustenance like looters downtown. They too were unable to call loved ones, yet couldn't go searching for them.

Days after Katrina, the Department of Corrections managed to bus thousands of Orleans Parish prisoners to dry facilities elsewhere. Not surprisingly, some people questioned why prisoners should be rescued before innocent civilians trapped in the Superdome, the Convention Center, or their homes.

The inmates disrupted by the storm were not all Boy Scouts, as one corrections official put it. But they weren't vicious murderers either. Some were incarcerated for loitering, DUI, or speeding. Many were women or juveniles.

Advance forward six years to New York City as it prepared last August for Hurricane Irene. Millions of New Yorkers wisely evacuated Manhattan as advised by the mayor's office. With the high probability of a direct hit, emergency officials feared for the safety and well-being of those who chose to stay in the city and wait out the storm inside their homes.

Other residents were quite willing to move out of harm's way, but were prevented from doing so. The 12,000 inmates at Riker's Island were not evacuated, despite the fact that the facility is partially constructed on land fill, is bordered by water, and vulnerable to storm surges. As it happened, Hurricane Irene did not impact the area anywhere close to what had been forecasted by the weather service. Yet concern lingers for what might have happened at Riker's had Irene not taken a turn for the better.

Reports from the National Institute of Corrections suggest that emergency preparedness is not a significant priority for America's prisons and jails. Few correctional systems have any type of emergency plan, and existing procedures are often outdated. Moreover, correctional staff are not sufficiently trained to handle emergency situations of various kinds, as it is generally too impractical and expensive to carry out preparedness drills beyond some table-top exercise.

Inmates stranded in prisons and jails, regardless of their transgressions, deserve no less consideration than other citizens when it comes to emergency preparedness and emergency response to catastrophe. And because their movement is controlled by public officials, inmates may actually deserve special attention. After all, they are at the mercy of two powerful forces -- one natural and the other political.