

Commentary on "Understanding Mass Panic and Other Collective Responses to Threat and Disaster"
Debunking the Myth of Panic

Ann E. Norwood

This excellent review of group responses to threat should be a "must read" for all those involved in preparing for and responding to emergencies, especially political leaders. Despite considerable effort by many individuals found in this article's reference list, the myth of mass panic stubbornly refuses to die. Key decisionmakers holding this belief all too often subscribe to a corollary that the best way to prevent panic is to withhold "bad news" from the public and to over-reassure. Thus, the wheels are set in motion to create the very panic officials aim to prevent. Mawson's article masterfully summarizes the data to dispel this pernicious myth and offers a compelling competing hypothesis to explain behavior—the primacy of social attachment behaviors in an emergency.

The author focuses his discussion on individual and collective flight behavior. He systematically offers data which challenge the classical "entrapment theory" of mass panic and argues effectively for a social attachment model in which the desire to be with familiar people during a disaster drives immediate behavior. The predominance of prosocial behaviors is also highlighted. In an even-handed

manner, the adaptive and maladaptive consequences of the wish to affiliate are described. For example, people in work settings with familiar colleagues tend to react more slowly to initial warnings than do people in settings in which they do not know one another. Also, the negative side of an increased sense of social connectedness is the accompanying tendency to exclude those outside the group and less tolerance for perceived "otherness" leading to scapegoating and hate crime.

This paper has implications beyond dispelling panic, in itself a valuable contribution. It offers a compelling model for understanding human behavior under extreme stress. Using this model, officials can develop strategies to build on the socially adaptive aspects of group behavior in disaster and anticipate and work to diminish negative behaviors such as scapegoating. Dr. Mawson has made an important scholarly contribution which can serve as a wonderful tool for educating policymakers. I plan to circulate it among senior public affairs officials to complement the crisis communication literature in hopes that it will guide the development of timely, accurate, and credible messages for future emergencies.

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