

WRHSAC Equity Data Project – Phase II

July 2024



BRRPC
Berkshire Regional Planning Commission

WRHSAC Equity in Emergencies Project

- **Goals:** Identify groups experiencing functional and access needs or circumstances, such as low incomes and disabilities, which are likely to make them at greater risk from threats and hazards, and that might impact an individual's ability to respond quickly and appropriately before, during, and after emergencies.
- Assist Boards of Health and Emergency Management Directors to equitably prepare for emergencies.

Equity In Emergency Reports Available

- Phase I: County Level Reports – www.wrhsac.org
- Phase II: 101 Town/City Specific Reports
 - Posted on [Equity in Emergency Management | WRHSAC.](#)
 - Distributed by the Western Mass Public Health Emergency Preparedness Coalitions
 - Available to all EMD/BOH on request from BRPC.

Disclaimers:

- We are not experts on equity, systemic racism, stigma, or bias.
- We acknowledge that racism and the experience of systemic racism, stigma, and bias play substantial roles in every area of our lives.
- Our intention is to avoid singling out or causing additional harm to any individuals or groups.
- For this project, we focused on demographics, indicators, and factors that are known to impact the equitable distribution of information and resources in emergencies. It is sometimes said that 10% of the population will need 90% of the resources in an emergency. These reports help to identify some of the characteristics of that 10%.

Understanding the Numbers

- **A Point in Time:** The data are taken at one point in time. They change frequently. The margins of error are often large, especially in small towns.
- **Quantitative Data:** The numbers are not exact, but this does not change the importance of the problem very much. Every town will have some people living with disabilities, on low incomes, or alone which all impact their ability to respond quickly and appropriately to emergencies.
- **A Descriptive Guide:** These reports are intended to provide another tool to guide Boards of Health and Emergency Management Directors when they are planning response, mitigation and recovery in their communities.

Equity Project Approach:

- Agreed on a working definition of equity and equitable.
- Kept the focus on Western Mass, and areas we might be able to improve while acknowledging systemic bias and stigma.
- Identified priority groups and characteristics Responders should consider when preparing for a more equitable and effective emergency responses.
- Conducted targeted interviews and mined official data sources.
- Created community level reports as each town/city likely had different demographics and challenges they want to consider.

Working Definitions:

- **Equitable/Equity:**

- *Equity is the principle that to achieve equal outcomes, resources often must be allocated according to individual circumstances.*
- *Equity is distinct from equality where each individual or group is given the same resources, regardless of circumstances.*
- **We found** that many EMD/BOH already consider equity and work to meet the needs of individuals – one size doesn't fit all.

Other Working Definitions:

- **Fair:** characterized by honesty/justice, lack of bias, the removal of barriers
- **Bias:** preference for or against a person or group, usually in a way considered to be unfair. Often built into systems in ways that are hard to identify.
- **Stigma:** negative feelings associated with a particular circumstance, quality, characteristic or person

Hazard and Risk Assessments

Hazard Consequence + Impact on those At-Risk x Frequency/Probability = Risk Priority

- An inconvenient hazard like a 30-inch snowstorm in Berkshire County might be a life-threatening hazard in Boston.
- We used to say pandemics were high consequence, low probability events and probably not worth spending much time preparing for. Note: this is our 2nd respiratory pandemic (H1N1 – 2009) in 10 years and fourth in 20 years.
- The **disproportionate impact** on the most vulnerable, at-risk individuals may mean that a relatively Low Impact emergency is actually a very High-Risk concern in a community based on the individuals who are impacted.
- [Population Considerations for Emergency Preparedness and Response - RHIhub Toolkit \(ruralhealthinfo.org\)](http://ruralhealthinfo.org)

What Data/Interviews told us:

Some surprising things we learned:

- The larger cities seemed better prepared to deal with individuals with equity issues as they already have a robust infrastructure of private and public organizations and agencies providing social services. Their problem was more one of size and scale.
- Only town/city managers (& 1 EMD) worried about Cybersecurity.
- Rural residents seemed more prepared for natural disasters, but their towns had fewer resources including paid staff.
- Everyone talked about the need for more housing options
- Most EMD/BOH already consider equity in their response; it was seen as a normal part of their job to meet the needs of their residents & save lives

What wasn't surprising:

- Everyone wanted and needed more money and staff and more sustainable funding so that good programs didn't have to constantly scramble for funds to stay alive.

Hazards and Threats

- The Hazards and Threats were similar in the four counties, but the exposure created by different demographics, topography, and resources created different vulnerabilities and priorities.

County Concerns – Each was Different

- **Berkshire** has an aging population with a large number of visitors and second homeowners, creating significant income disparities and housing shortages.
- **Franklin** is more rural, older and, has a very big river that floods and cuts the county in half.
- **Hampshire** has the 5 Colleges, is younger and with that same big river that floods and cuts the county in half with one side of the river being more rural and other more urban.
- **Hampden** is a mix of very wealthy small towns, right next to very large, diverse, poorer, large cities and densely populated towns with over 50 languages spoken.

Common Western Mass Hazards/Threats

1. **Extreme Weather:** Weather events resulting in lengthy power outages, major flooding, prolonged extreme heat or cold, multi-year droughts, or extensive wind damage to infrastructure or the environment. Flooding is likely to have the most impact as many major roads and bridges could be flooded. Floods can contaminate structures and vehicles, water and sewer systems, and food supplies and contribute to dam failures.
2. **Cybersecurity** events whether natural such as a EMP or man-made such as hacking that impact local governments, institutions, or major employers, including the hospital system, our lives and operations are based on a working web.
3. **Disease Outbreaks** and pandemics that overwhelm our medical systems, close schools, kill or injure people, decimate animals and herds, destroy forests and crops, or reduce economic activity.
4. **Critical Infrastructure Disruptions** that impact our food and water supplies, emergency services, supply chains, ability to communicate, staffing, bridges, internet, schools, childcare, housing, power, roads, medical services, social services, community organizations,
5. **Lack of Staff** required for communities and organizations to function effectively. Staffing issues are in every industry and lack of housing make finding and keeping staff harder.

Common Western Mass Hazards/Threats

6. **Lack of Housing:** a critical issue in every county. Unhoused people are harder to reach and need more services.
7. **Transportation & Supply Chain Issues**
8. **Sudden influx of Evacuees/Visitors** that would overwhelm local services and infrastructure.
9. **Active Shooter, Civil Unrest, Workplace Violence, Mental Health** issues that spread; impact multiple communities.
10. **Major hazardous spills,** especially along major roads, rail lines, water supplies.
11. **Drought, Wildfires, Landslides** – most of the unstable areas in Massachusetts are in Western Mass, though lower populations in those areas than in the Eastern areas.
12. **Regional Inequity:** Rural Western Mass is far from the seat of power and large cities.

Improvement Recommendations: What are the priorities/Next Steps?

Plans should consider the most vulnerable

- In most emergencies, the most vulnerable are likely the least prepared and will take the most resources.
- Town/City/County can use these Equity Reports to better understand the individuals/groups in their community who are likely to need the most additional assistance in emergencies.
- Mitigation strategies should be considered in all plans as prevention is usually cheaper and more effective than response.

Reach out to your local trusted organizations

- ❖ Likely there are many local, trusted organizations that already work with your target populations and groups.
- ❖ Get to know them and what you can do for each other.
- ❖ They likely have very effective ways of reaching their clients and can help with getting your messages out.

Planning Steps to Consider

1. Review your community's Equity Report. Focus on the individuals who are likely to need the most help in emergencies.
2. Review your current plans and consider updating them by either revising or adding a Functional and Access Needs Annex.
3. Create a contact list of agencies that can help with your most vulnerable individuals.
4. Work with community-based organizations and other partners to learn who they serve, how to work together to plan for an emergency response and how you can reach the clients they serve.
5. Develop strategies/MOUs for contacting your vulnerable people.

Public Health Program

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