

Lessons learned from Japan's earthquake applicable for hurricanes, other natural disasters

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The importance of knowing your neighbors and taking warnings seriously are just two of the life-saving lessons that can be learned from the earthquake and tsunami that struck Japan six months ago, says a Purdue University political science professor.

"Knowing your [neighbors](#) could be the difference between life and death when it comes to surviving a disaster," says Daniel Aldrich, an associate professor of political science who studies disaster recovery and visited Japan twice this summer. "[Survival rates](#) often depended on how well individuals were connected to people in their communities. This was especially true in Japan where many of these people on the coastal towns were elderly and they relied on others to help them evacuate.

"After talking to the survivors, [first responders](#) and [relief workers](#) in Japan about what happened six months ago, I can't stress how important it is for people to know their neighbors. The first responders weren't professionals - they were neighbors who knew how many people lived in a house and the habits of that person so they knew where to look or dig to find survivors. We saw this recently when the stage collapsed at the Indiana State Fair. Hundreds of people rushed to help others. These events are a good reminder to encourage anyone to learn CPR."

The [earthquake](#) and resulting tsunami hit Japan on March 11, resulting in 21,000 deaths. Aldrich visited the affected areas this summer as part of a

research team that is collecting and analyzing [demographic data](#), such as evacuation rates and citizens' ages, from 300 affected towns. He met with local survivors, volunteers and representatives from non-government organizations.

During his research, Aldrich also observed that some people didn't evacuate because of a past tsunami experience - when the water didn't flood as predicted or they think it could not be any worse.

"We've seen this disbelief before with other [natural disasters](#), and it's a reminder that how people respond to a warning is part of a learned behavior," Aldrich says. "Despite the warning, they are taking into account their past experiences. This is a reminder to people that each warning stands alone - what happened before doesn't matter."

Another lesson learned from this disaster is how volunteer efforts to care for special needs populations, such as the elderly, have been hindered because of medical privacy policies. Because information is not released about the people staying at shelters who have disabilities, it is more difficult for relief groups to provide aid. Aldrich said he observed relief workers spending extra time visiting shelters in advance to assess needs for wheelchairs, medications and other supplies.

"These laws have clauses in times of need, but there were still gaps in providing care to the special needs populations because there is such a fear of violating any privacy laws," he says. "These are discussions all nations can have in advance - how do we loosen or work within such regulations?"

Aldrich is the author of the 2008 book "Site Fights: Divisive Facilities and Civil Society in Japan and the West" and the upcoming book, "Building Resilience: Social Capital in Post-Disaster Recovery." He is a fellow in the Mansfield Foundation US-Japan Network for the Future

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Provided by Purdue University

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