

Cognitive Earthquake: Who's Really in Need?

May 09, 2013

The Huffington Post:

In January 2000, an earthquake shook China's mountainous Yunnan province. It was a moderate earthquake and killed only seven, but it leveled more than 40,000 homes and injured thousands of residents. According to the World Health Organization, as many as 1.8 million were affected by the disaster, and in need of shelter, medical attention or other aid.

The scientists have a theory, which is that we respond to deaths more decisively than we respond to other, undefined suffering — even though it is obviously not the dead who need help. They set out to test this idea, and also to see if there might be a way to increase sensitivity to those left behind.

To verify the basic idea, Evangelidis and Van den Bergh analyzed actual natural disaster relief data for a decade, beginning at the time of the Yunnan quake. They expected that the number of fatalities — rather than those more vaguely “affected” — would determine the likelihood that people would give money. And that's what they found. Indeed, donors came up with an additional \$9000 for each additional person killed — compared to nothing for each additional living victim. There was no correlation between the number of fatalities and the number of people in need, meaning that donors give more aid as the number of dead climbs — yet remain insensitive to the real need of survivors.

Read the whole story: [*The Huffington Post*](#)

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