Rural and Suburban Population Surge Following Detonation of an Improvised Nuclear Device: A New Model to Estimate Impact

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ABSTRACT

Background: The objective of the study was to model urban evacuation into surrounding communities after the detonation of an improvised nuclear device (IND) to assist rural and suburban planners in understanding and effectively planning to address the effects of population surges.

Methods: Researchers developed parameters for how far evacuees would travel to escape disasters and factors that would influence choice of destination from studies of historical evacuations, surveys of citizens’ evacuation intentions in hypothetical disasters, and semistructured interviews with key informants and emergency preparedness experts. Those parameters became the inputs to a “push-pull” model of how many people would flee in the 4 scenarios and where they would go.

Results: The expanded model predicted significant population movements from the New York City borough of Manhattan and counties within 20 km of Manhattan to counties within a 150-mi radius of the assumed IND detonation. It also predicted that even in some communities located far from Manhattan, arriving evacuees would increase the population needing services by 50% to 150%.

Conclusions: The results suggest that suburban and rural communities could be overwhelmed by evacuees from their center city following an IND detonation. They also highlight the urgency of educating and communicating with the public about radiation hazards to mitigate panic and hysteria, anticipating the ways in which a mass exodus may disrupt or even cripple rescue and response efforts, and devising creative ways to exercise and drill for an event about which there is great denial and fatalism.

Key Words: improvised nuclear device, evacuation model, push-pull model, rural preparedness

Since the terrorism events of September 11, 2001, political leaders, academics, and government agencies consistently and with increasing urgency have warned Americans about the risks of nuclear terrorism on US soil. During the last decade, Congress, the Department of Homeland Security, and the Department of Commerce have directed large appropriations to screening of cargo and citizens at foreign and domestic ports and at US border crossings to prevent fissile material—the essential raw material of an improvised nuclear device (IND)—from entering the United States. The Department of Homeland Security also has invested substantial sums promoting next-generation nuclear detection technology and enhancing local government capacity to respond to catastrophic events. It has devised and drilled 15 “national planning scenarios” that are included in the National Preparedness Guidelines, including 1 planning scenario built around the detonation of a 10-kiloton (kT) IND.

Through the Cooperative Threat Reduction Program, commonly known as Nunn-Lugar, the United States has directed billions of dollars to Russia and other countries of the former Soviet Union to identify, deactivate, dispose of, and secure the Cold War’s nuclear arsenal and provide employment to nuclear scientists and technicians previously employed in the Soviet military and arms industries. Federal agencies and the state and local counterparts that rely upon federal funding have embraced a broad culture of all-hazards preparedness. Even without considering the presumed substantial intelligence and law enforcement assets that the US government uses to detect illicit commerce in nuclear materials, the US government’s multilayered defenses against domestic nuclear terrorism suggest that our government continues to view the threat as palpable and serious.

It is only recently that a critical mass of analysts has begun to address seriously what may happen if prevention failed and a terrorist succeeded in detonating even a low-yield (10 kT) IND in the downtown or port area of a major American city. (For an introduction to this topic, see National Center for Disaster Preparedness: Day Three: Regional Resiliency and Health Challenges in the Aftermath of Nuclear Terrorism, at http://www...
The detonation of even a small IND in a major American city would cause massive mortality and morbidity and a collapse of infrastructure. Also, it is widely believed that an IND attack would create a difficult-to-control spontaneous mass evacuation. Such an exodus would have significant adverse effects on the communities that would receive a massive population surge in a short time. A mass evacuation into or through a community would compromise existing resources and infrastructure, creating concern about food supplies, water, gasoline, shelter and sanitation, health systems, transportation, and law enforcement. Meeting the enormous scale of arriving evacuees’ needs while simultaneously preserving services to residents would be a logistical challenge requiring coordination at multiple levels.

A mass evacuation also could congregate highways, secondary roads, and local streets spreading outward from the regional center. Such gridlock would compromise plans to mobilize first responders and transportation resources, move victims to treatment facilities, deploy local law enforcement, establish mobile hospitals, and distribute state and federal relief and response supplies to where they are needed. Estimating the evacuation-driven population surge after an IND detonation is critical to effective advance planning to address these challenges.

METHODS

The National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago Evacuation Modeling Project

Modeling the evacuation of urban areas has focused in general on ensuring the efficient transfer of the largest possible number of city residents beyond the danger zone. Despite mass urban evacuation events such as Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma, efforts to assess where evacuees actually went or are likely to go and the impact evacuees had or potentially may have on destination communities have been limited. The original purpose of this project was to provide a resource for rural and suburban emergency planners to conceptualize the potential effects of an urban evacuation on their communities. It was inspired in part by evidence, subsequently reinforced by NORC key informant interviews described in this section, that most rural and suburban planners had not considered the effects of population surge after urban disasters and that lack of understanding of this phenomenon was a barrier to planning. NORC extended the project in 2010 to develop a model for predicting the numbers of evacuees that suburban and rural communities may receive after the detonation of an IND in midtown Manhattan (New York City).

The model developed through this project provides estimates of numbers of evacuees and their distributions based upon a conceptual “push-pull” model such as has been used in analyses of human migration. In this model, the degree of the “push” is dependent upon the nature of the precipitating event and the “pull” reflects the relative attractiveness of surrounding communities as potential evacuee destinations. In light of the limited public health infrastructures and sparse community resources in many rural and even suburban areas, estimating population surge after urban disasters is a critical first step to effective emergency planning.

Variable Identification

We began by identifying variables believed to be predictive of urban-to-rural evacuation. Our preferred sources were variables and data culled from the reporting on actual disaster events such as hurricanes and the 1979 Three Mile Island (TMI) nuclear reactor accident. Because such data are limited, we also used studies of intended evacuation behavior, including a 2007 national survey of urban citizens’ evacuation intentions, conducted by the authors. We supplemented the available literature with interviews with preparedness experts at the national level and in rural and urban communities and vetted all of our data with an expert advisory committee to select and weight a set of predictive variables. Using the variables identified from these sources, we developed a model to predict population movements within an urban region. Based upon this model, we developed an online geographic information system tool that modeled evacuation in the 3 scenarios for the 100 largest metropolitan areas in the United States and for all of the state capitals (www.cei.psu.edu/evac). In 2010, we modified the tool to model evacuation after the detonation of an IND in midtown Manhattan (www.cei.psu.edu/evac/nyc.html).

Historical data and research evidence came from several sources. A number of studies were conducted in the years after the TMI nuclear power plant incident. The hurricane-prone conditions of the southeastern United States also have led to significant research and publication on hurricanes and other natural disasters that can result in evacuation. More recently, the threat of terrorism after the attacks on September 11, 2001, has prompted an emergence of research on issues related to hypothetical acts of terror and the need for preparedness and evacuation planning.

Johnson and Ziegler argue that perceived risk is greater in a radiological emergency than other types of disasters and note that evacuees flee farther from a radiological disaster than other events. They noted that for the TMI incident, the observed 85-mi median evacuation distance of central Pennsylvania residents was farther than evacuees traveled when fleeing from any of the more than 500 natural and technological disasters in the United States between 1960 and 1973, as cataloged by the Environmental Protection Agency. Although the Mississauga, Canada, train derailment in 1979 prompted the evacuation of approximately 250,000 people, those evacuees generally remained within the Toronto–Hamilton corridor, only a few miles from the spreading chlorine gas cloud. Similarly, Ziegler and Johnson note that during natural disasters such as floods, evacu-
ees tend to travel no farther than the projected high water line. At the time of their writing, the longest median evacuation distance on record in response to a Gulf Coast hurricane had been only 80 mi. Various studies cited by Ziegler and Johnson found the median evacuation distances in response to TMI to be 85, 100, and 112 mi. More recently, Dow and Cutler observed that in the context of hurricanes involving South Carolina, the percentage of evacuees traveling out of state (and, by implication, the distance traveled during evacuations) has increased, with 15% of evacuees traveling beyond the state border during Hurricane Bertha in July 1996, 28% during Hurricane Fran in September 1996, and 38% during Hurricane Floyd in September 1999. The 3 reasons given by evacuees for longer-distance travel were friends and family offering shelter lived farther away, the danger from the storm was great, and it was necessary to travel that far to find available lodging.

As part of this project, NORC at the University of Chicago conducted a survey in 2007 of respondents’ intentions to evacuate after the detonation of a dirty bomb or during an influenza pandemic under varying conditions of external influence, as well as likely evacuation distance and known destinations. Prior evacuation surveys were used as a basis for survey content development, combined with qualitative research conducted as part of the NORC study; studies protocols were approved by the NORC at the University of Chicago institutional review board. Survey respondents were a nationally representative sample of 1505 adults living in urban and suburban areas. Respondents were reached by telephone in March 2007 and administered a 15-item survey questionnaire as part of the EXCEL National Telephone Omnibus Study, conducted by International Communications Research (Media, PA). (EXCEL uses a fully replicated, stratified, single-stage random-digit-dialing sample of telephone households. The EXCEL Omnibus Survey is conducted on a weekly basis, allowing survey questions to be added on a rolling basis. Nonresponses [after 2 attempted calls] are replaced with matched respondents based on standard demographic information until the desired sample size is achieved, providing the relative advantage of quick survey turn-around. Details on response rate are not provided because this matched respondent process is used in lieu of continued follow-up. Using this method, full survey completion was achieved in a 2-week process.) International Communications Research also collected standard demographic and classification data for each respondent household. Although 77% and 91% of respondents intended to evacuate if the government suggested or ordered evacuation, for the pandemic influenza and dirty bomb scenarios, respectively, 27% and 40% of respondents would still intend to evacuate even if it was against government advice. In both scenarios, 55% of respondents indicated that they would be likely to travel to a rural destination and 52% of respondents indicated that they would likely remain within a 150-mi radius.

Certain characteristics may draw evacuees to particular communities. Analyses of actual evacuations, surveys of respondents’ intentions concerning evacuation from a hypothetical hurricane with the hypothetical nuclear incident studies, a survey of intentions concerning evacuation from a hypothetical hurricane produced slightly lower percentages, with 60% reporting that they would stay with friends and family, 24% in a hotel or motel, 12% in a shelter, and 4% doing something else. As the final step in identifying push-pull factors, NORC conducted interviews with 17 key informants representing academia, government, and the private sector. To incorporate representation from varied geographic regions and city sizes, key informants were selected from 6 paired rural and urban communities (rural informants were located within 20 minutes to 4 hours of the urban informant locale) and 5 national preparedness experts were chosen. The semistructured interviews focused on issues related to likely evacuee behavior in various scenarios and on critical features of surrounding communities that would make them more or less attractive as destination sites.

Based upon the reviewed literature and the concurrence of key informants, we selected the following “push” and “pull” factors in developing our model algorithms:

- **Push**: People will evacuate farther from a radiological event than from a natural hazard such as a hurricane, and as more people evacuate, the distance traveled becomes greater. As such, key push variables are the number of people evacuating and the distance traveled. As a result, the destination county’s distance from the IND detonation becomes a key factor in developing the algorithm.

- **Pull**: Pull variables influence the relative attractiveness of potential destination communities and include items such as the presence of friends and family, the number and availability of hotel rooms, the capacity and quality of the road networks providing access to the destination, the number of hospital beds and pharmacies, and the extent of second/vacation homeownership. In developing the algorithm we limited pull variables to those that were available in national data sets containing information at the county level (Table 1).

### Algorithm Development

To predict spontaneous urban evacuation and the subsequent distribution of the evacuating population, we developed a con-
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paredness researchers, we weighted each variable to reflect its
gency management personnel and academic modelers and pre-
expert panel comprising regional public health and emer-
pared. Second, using research findings and concurrence of an
ables, regardless of their unit of measurement, could be com-

The push-pull model assumes that a pushing force is uniquely
genenerated by each scenario at the urban origin, and a pulling
force or attractiveness is generated by features of the potential
destination communities. Using the previously described analy-
se, we set a percentage of the urban population expected to
evacuate upon a disaster. We subsequently distributed those
evacuees using each destination’s relative pulling force across
all counties located within a 150-mi radius of the affected ur-
ban center. Because the number of counties rises proportion-
ally as the radius of the potential evacuation zone increases, we
limited the radius to 150 mi to prevent findings from becoming
too diffuse. Using the 2007 NORC survey findings, we set the
proportion of evacuees remaining within the 150-mi radius to
52% (25% within 50 mi; 27% between 50 to 150 mi). The
model does not address the destinations of evacuees assumed
to travel beyond the 150-mi radius.

Based on the time elapsed since the event and its effect on the final
destination. This, however, does not consider the distance from
the event. The fifth step estimated the probabilities of evacuees from
the affected area traveling to different destinations at varying
distances. The distribution of evacuees is then estimated by cal-
culating expected total evacuees by probabilities of reaching
each of the different destinations within the 150-mi radius.

In February 2010, in conjunction with the National Center for
Disaster Preparedness’ February 2010 Day Three: Regional Re-
siliency and Health Challenges in the Aftermath of Nuclear
Terrorism roundtable, we extended our model to include evacu-
ation after the detonation of a 10-kT IND in midtown Man-
hattan. To accommodate this scenario, we modified the push
side of the model. We decreased the percentage of the popu-
lation evacuating Manhattan from 65% to 40% to reflect a much
greater level of injuries and fatalities from an IND detonation
compared with other urban disasters, while increasing the over-
all Manhattan population to include an estimated 1.48 mil-
lion commuters and 910,000 tourists. (NORC estimated the av-

day commuter population based upon data from the 2000
city.html] and average daily tourist population based upon
data from the New York City Office of Tourism [http://www.
nyng.com/event=view.article&id=78912; estimate based on an-
ual number of tourists and 7-day average length of stay].) In
addition, we assumed that a large number of residents would
evacuate the counties immediately surrounding the borough of
Manhattan (ie, those within a 20-km radius) and Manhattan
itself. After adjusting these county populations for the com-
muters whom we were counting in the adjusted Manhattan popu-
lation, we assumed that 80% would evacuate from counties
within 10 km of Manhattan and 60% from counties between
10 and 20 km.

The model distributes evacuees that remain within the 150-mi
radius of the affected area across the destination counties based
upon the counties’ relative pull scores. A pull score is a stan-
dardized measure designed to reflect the potential destina-
tion’s relative attractiveness to evacuees. Computing each coun-
ty’s pull score was accomplished in 5 steps. First, we transfor-
mated the data for each pull variable (eg, the number of hotel rooms
in a county) into standardized scores so that all of the vari-
ables, regardless of their unit of measurement, could be com-
pared. Second, using research findings and concurrence of an
expert panel comprising regional public health and emergency
management personnel and academic modelers and prepared-
ness researchers, we weighted each variable to reflect its

Relative contribution to the destination’s attractiveness to evacu-
nees. Third, we generated weighted standardized scores, provid-
ing a single total score for each county in each scenario. In the
fourth step we obtained ratios of weighted standardized scores
for all of the counties. These ratios measure, under similar con-
ditions and irrespective of distance from the source, the prob-
ability that an evacuee would choose a county as its final des-
tination. This, however, does not consider the distance from
the event and its effect on the final destination. The fifth and
final step was a computation of each county’s relative score by
considering its relative attractiveness and distance from the event.
The fifth step estimated the probabilities of evacuees from
the affected area traveling to different destinations at varying
distances. The distribution of evacuees is then estimated by cal-
culating expected total evacuees by probabilities of reaching
each of the different destinations within the 150-mi radius.

Estimating Population Surge From an IND Detonation

TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables and Data Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Variable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance and road network information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary highways with limited access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith Travel Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary highways without limited access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith Travel Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends and family (nativity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000 US Census</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vacant housing units: for seasonal, recreational,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>or occasional use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000 US Census</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotel/motel rooms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith Travel Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreational vehicle parks and recreational camps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith Travel Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and medical resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospital beds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bureau of Labor Statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pharmacies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bureau of Labor Statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living in same House in 1995 and 2000 (&gt;5 y old)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000 US Census</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household moved into unit 1990-1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000 US Census</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household moved into unit 1970-1979</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000 US Census</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household moved into unit 1969 or before</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000 US Census</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population density</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000 US Census</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
pull of Long Island by 50%, to reflect the lower likelihood of evacuees traveling to a destination with more limited accessibility.

In the context of considering likely evacuation behavior, it is worth noting that there has been much reporting recently on an emerging consensus among federal agencies and major city public health departments that sheltering in place would be the most effective way to prevent harmful radiation exposure and contamination, and on incipient governmental efforts to communicate this message. In fact, the most comprehensive federal government statement on this matter, the Planning Guidance for Response to a Nuclear Detonation, states unequivocally that “the best initial action immediately following a nuclear explosion is to take shelter in the nearest and most protective building or structure and listen for instructions from authorities,” and that “no evacuation should be attempted until basic information is available regarding fallout distribution and radiation dose rates.” Given the well-documented fear of radiation among both first responders and the public at large, and leaders’ reluctance to emphasize this issue, it likely will be many years before studies may document a change in citizens’ evacuation behavior or intentions that is sufficient to justify reconsidering the overall assumption of evacuation intent inherent to the model.

RESULTS

The IND version of the model generates estimates of the population surge from arriving evacuees for counties within a 150-mi radius of Manhattan. Outputs demonstrate significant population movement after urban disasters. Figure 1 shows the number of evacuees projected to be received in each destination county within the 150-mi radius, and Figure 2 shows the projected percentage increase in the destination county’s population. Although larger numbers of evacuees will travel to other urban areas because of a greater likelihood of family relationships and greater resource availability (Figure 1), smaller communities tend to receive larger proportions of evacuees relative to their population (Figure 2). Table 2 presents outputs for a sample of destination counties, highlighting total postevacuation population and percentage population change for the IND scenario.

COMMENT

The approach described in this article represents an initial attempt to develop a predictive model to determine the number of evacuees likely to seek shelter in rural and suburban counties after a disaster or public health emergency in a nearby urban center. Prior work has focused on how to move the maximum number of urban residents away from potential danger; however, there has been little focus on determining the im-
impact that such an evacuation may have on the destination communities.

A key finding, based upon our model, is that rural counties will experience the greatest impact of population increase relative to resident population. Although urban counties are likely to receive greater numbers of evacuees, their ability to absorb and care for these individuals is also greater. The greater “relative impact” of evacuees on rural communities has significant implications for sheltering, feeding, and providing medical care to those evacuees. Given the limited public health, health care delivery, water and sanitation, and administrative infrastructures of rural communities, these systems may be quickly overwhelmed in the event of a mass urban evacuation.

Such a mass evacuation is likely to include a significant number of people with trauma and burn injuries and with radiation exposure and contamination. The ability of the receiving communities to treat these evacuees adequately is questionable. Recent studies of urban health care systems have reported a broad

**TABLE 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Distance from Manhattan (in Miles)</th>
<th>Original Population</th>
<th>Evacuees Received</th>
<th>Total Post-Evacuation Population</th>
<th>Percent Population Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hartford</td>
<td>CT</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>857,183</td>
<td>167,182</td>
<td>1,024,365</td>
<td>19.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Windham</td>
<td>CT</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>109,091</td>
<td>50,518</td>
<td>159,609</td>
<td>46.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cape May</td>
<td>NJ</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>102,326</td>
<td>121,424</td>
<td>223,750</td>
<td>118.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middlesex</td>
<td>NJ</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>750,162</td>
<td>116,098</td>
<td>866,260</td>
<td>15.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delaware</td>
<td>NY</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>48,055</td>
<td>70,411</td>
<td>118,466</td>
<td>146.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nassau</td>
<td>NY</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1,334,544</td>
<td>108,305</td>
<td>1,442,849</td>
<td>8.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rockland</td>
<td>NY</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>286,753</td>
<td>83,424</td>
<td>370,177</td>
<td>29.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philadelphia</td>
<td>PA</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>1,517,550</td>
<td>296,195</td>
<td>1,813,745</td>
<td>19.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susquehanna</td>
<td>PA</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>42,238</td>
<td>50,294</td>
<td>92,532</td>
<td>119.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIGURE 2**

Percentage of change in destination county population

Urban to Rural Evacuation Tool

Expected target counties for evacuees from New York City, NY from Scenario: 3 day out

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consensus that in many US cities, the detonation of a 10- to 20-kT IND could destroy a large portion of the health care infrastructure, including many of the facilities capable of providing treatment for severe burn injuries and mass radiation exposure;16,17; that most hospitals view themselves as unprepared to respond to a nuclear event;18; and that similar deficiencies exist with regard to first response and prehospital care, triage and altered standards of care, medical countermeasures stockpiles, health workforce absenteeism, and regional coordination for extreme events.19 There was a clear consensus among participants in the Day 3 Roundtable that "no American city or region, even with abundant state and federal government and military support, has sufficient health care infrastructure and resources to handle the anticipated injuries and illness from the detonation of a 10-kiloton nuclear device."20

Although our methodology is intended to provide information on numbers of likely evacuees, we caution that the purpose of presenting such estimates is to provide a resource for rural and suburban emergency planners to conceptualize the potential effects of an urban evacuation on their communities. Our intent is to stimulate rural and suburban preparedness planning among community leaders that have not previously considered the issue of secondary impact on surrounding communities. The estimates of evacuee numbers can provide an initial framework for the development of plans to respond to the potential influx of evacuees.

Our methodology has several limitations. Both the selection of predictive variables and the weighting of the variables were limited by 5 factors. First, there is sparse historical evidence from which to select variables known to predict evacuation behavior. In the United States, the only major radiological emergency occurred more than 25 years ago (TMI). More recent evacuations for which data are available tend to be hurricane or other natural disaster scenarios. We hesitate to generalize certain aspects of natural disaster evacuation research to other potential evacuation scenarios because there are confounding factors in natural disasters, such as damage to property and prior natural disaster experience for some individuals. In addition, natural disasters frequently have a larger radius of impact or, in the case of a hurricane, an expected path that may affect individuals’ choice of evacuation route and destination. As a result, we have attempted wherever possible to confirm the reliability of predictive variables across different types of disaster scenarios. A second factor is the use of survey research to identify and weight variables. In general, disaster and evacuation surveys use either a prospective or retrospective design, and a known disconnect exists between respondents’ stated intentions and their actual behavior. Although a handful of surveys compare stated intentions with actual behavior in a subsequent disaster, the unpredictable nature of disasters make such research difficult. A third limiting factor is the use of a limited number of key informants and advisors to identify variables where gaps exist in the literature. Attempting to mitigate this factor, we included a wide sample of informants and advisors at various levels and in various positions related to emergency preparedness. The fourth limiting factor was the restriction of variables to those for which we could access national data sets with information at the county level. Although more granular data sources may exist for other plausible pull factors such as actual hospital and intensive care unit bed vacancies, actual pharmaceutical and ventilator inventories, and actual hotel vacancy rates, these were not available in forms that could be incorporated uniformly across jurisdictions. Finally, because we focused primarily on creating a framework to help planners conceptualize localized effects of an evacuation from a nearby urban center, we opted for assumptions that are strongly supported by a comprehensive literature review and contemporary expert opinion, rather than for totally unassailable assumptions. We hope that future modeling refinements will enable local planners to incorporate alternative assumptions to perform sensitivity analyses and formulate their own conclusions about their vulnerability.

CONCLUSIONS

The NORC Evacuation Modeling Project strongly supports the conclusion voiced by experts at the National Center for Disaster Preparedness Day Three roundtable—that a spontaneous mass evacuation from an IND blast in an urban center could lead to a dramatic population surge in surrounding communities. Such an exodus would extend panic and devastation far beyond the locus of the event, draining food, water, medicines, gasoline, and other resources from surrounding communities and potentially causing gridlock that would severely compromise many elements of the official disaster response. The model’s projected population increases of up to 150% in surrounding communities add urgency to the Day 3 recommendations for enhanced public education and official communications to reduce spontaneous evacuation and for mass evacuation drills and exercises. Such efforts would help to mitigate concerns described above, and by increasing sheltering in place and reducing citizens’ exposure to radiation, they also could increase survivability. These and other equally sobering issues highlight the urgent need for both a next generation of evacuation simulations and federally mandated and funded regional IND response planning and preparation.

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