Internet Access and Social Media Usage in New Hanover County During and After

Hurricane Florence

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Background

While many may view an event such as Hurricane Florence as a purely natural

phenomenon, natural disasters impact the social world in a way that amplifies issues

that already exist within any given community. When a disaster hits a community, it

exposes preexisting inequalities due to a community's social, economic, or political

status (Fothergill, Phillips, Lovekamp; 2013, pg. 12). This community based research

project, in partnership with Support the Port, aims to identify and analyze issues within

New Hanover County during the time of Hurricane Florence. This paper will provide and

analyze data on how many members of the community have access to Internet and

social media (Facebook, twitter, Instagram, etc.), and how important it was for

gathering information on resources throughout Hurricane Florence.

Methods

For this project, we created a survey to be distributed to people within Support

the Port's database. The survey was available online as well as at Support the Port

events. The survey asked respondents to answer yes/no questions about whether they

had Internet and social media, and asked them to rate how important they felt they

were in getting information on resources. The sample size was 187 respondents. The

data was analyzed through statistical tests that determine if a relationship is significant

or not. This analysis aims to answer the questions "Is access to Internet predictive of gathering information on resources?" and "Is social media usage predictive of gathering information on resources?"

Results

Of the total 187 respondents, 155 people had access to Internet, while 140 had access to social media. When asked how important Internet was in finding information on resources during the storm, 49.2% of respondents chose "Very Important" while 10.2% chose "Important." When asked the same about social media, 40.1% chose "Very Important," and 18.2% chose "Important." Respondents were asked to select all of the ways in which they accessed information before, during and after Hurricane Florence. 55.6% of respondents selected social media, while only 26.2% selected Internet. Of those who have social media, only 22.3% of respondents did go to a relief center, comparable to the 28.0% of those who did not have access to social media that went. The data is similar for access to Internet, with 20.3% of those with access going to a relief center, and 42.1% without.

Figure 1: Access to Internet and social media and relief center usage
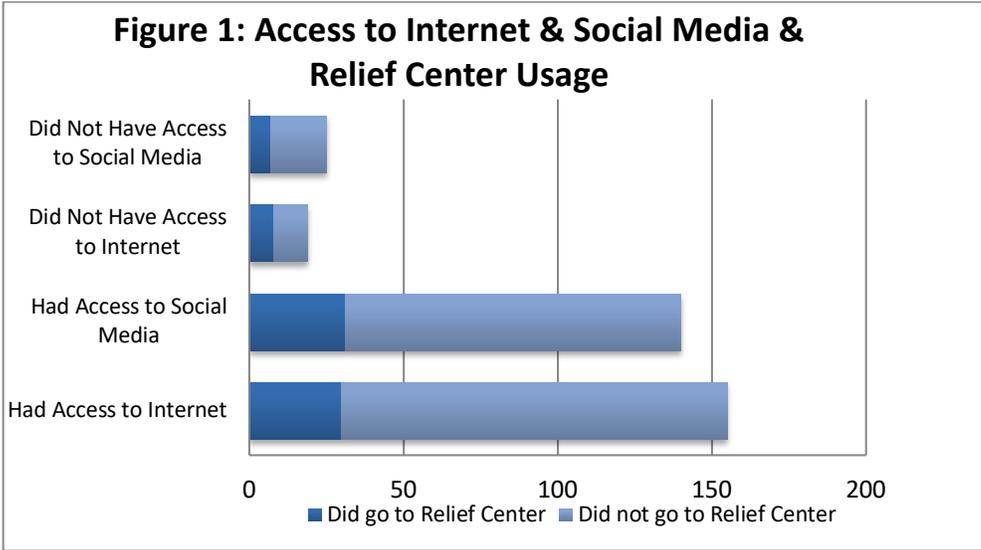
The data shows that there are also class differences in those who have access to Internet and social media. For respondents whose average annual household income is under $20,000, 68.8% had access to social media, while 92.4% of those with an income over $20,000 had access. The data for Internet access is also similar, with 70.8% of respondents with income under $20,000 having access.

Discussion/Implications

Overall, the majority of respondents believed that access to Internet and social media was either very important or important. However, there was a difference in whether a respondent used the Internet or social media to get information on resources during the storm. While respondents thought Internet and social media were relatively equal in terms of importance, twice the amount of people used social media in the actual gathering of information. This shows how important communication within the community is in terms of learning of and accessing necessary resources. While respondents believe that social media and Internet are important in gathering information, the individuals who did not have access had higher rates of going to relief centers. This begs the question: Are the people who could benefit from access to Internet and social media the most, the ones who currently have it? In addition, this survey data was collected from individuals who already had knowledge of Support the Port as a community resource. Perhaps the most vulnerable population has yet to be reached.

References

Fothergill, A., Philips, B. D., Lovekamp, W. E. (2013). *Social Vulnerability to Disasters*.

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