AJPH EDITORIALS

The Virtual Village: A 21st-Century Challenge for Community Preparedness

Communities are societal extensions of family. Since early times, humans banded together for mutual aid, companionship, and protection from threats.[1] Communities were forged by people living in the same geographic area with shared attitudes, interests, and goals for cultures, religions, and occupations.[1] However, social scientists expressed concerns during the Industrial Revolution about changes observed in the human experience as populations retreated from rural areas and close-knit family units in favor of big cities and life among strangers.[1]

Sometime in the latter part of the 20th century, the way people interacted began to shift dramatically.[2] In the United States, a decline in marriage and birthrates changed family dynamics and increased the number of adults living alone.[2] In 2018, there were 35.7 million single-person households, composing 28% of all United States households—a significant increase from 13% in 1960.[3] Social isolation is becoming more acute, with less community engagement as people rely on advances in technology to feel connected.[2]

TECHNOLOGY AND ITS INFLUENCE ON COMMUNITIES

Today the Internet virtually connects people around the globe—expanding the concept of community beyond geography. Community is an ever-changing concept influenced by rapidly shifting population trends, evolving cultural norms, and expanding technologies. Laptops and mobile devices are ubiquitous around the planet.[4] People are spending more time in screen-based social or business networks, and information exchange occurs more rapidly than was fathomable a century ago.[5] Although television remains a source for American news consumption, online news via Web sites, mobile phone applications, and social media is gaining popularity.[6]

THE INFORMATION AGE CONUNDRUM

The Internet makes it possible for almost anyone to share information and, sometimes, misinformation with a global community in minutes because of easy access (and to some degree unregulated messaging and anonymity).[6] Online consumers are likely to seek news outlets for information that aligns with ingrained perspectives.[5,7] Moreover, personal contacts may amplify or distort messages, and both inputs are perceived as accurate and relevant.[7] This raises an important consideration for public health: how do we ensure that virtual communities are prepared for a large-scale disaster?

A CHALLENGE FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Almost 20 years ago, public health scientists emphasized community engagement as a strategy for the development of health interventions and, ultimately, community resilience (https://bit.ly/30zunRK).

As reliance on information from online resources increases, how can public health safeguard the dissemination of accurate information needed for action when lives are at stake? Public health must navigate the communication technology terrain, break through silos, and convey life-saving information on the basis of facts, current information, and best evidence.

Thus, we issue a clarion call in this *AJPH* supplement to engage in the Virtual Village. Together, we must create a credible preparedness community online, which can assuage doubts and fears and encourage community partnerships that support populations—whether physically or virtually connected. This is a foreseeable challenge for community preparedness in the 21st century. AJPH

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Note. *The findings and conclusions in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.*

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