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INDIVIDUAL GIVING

Fatal Flaw

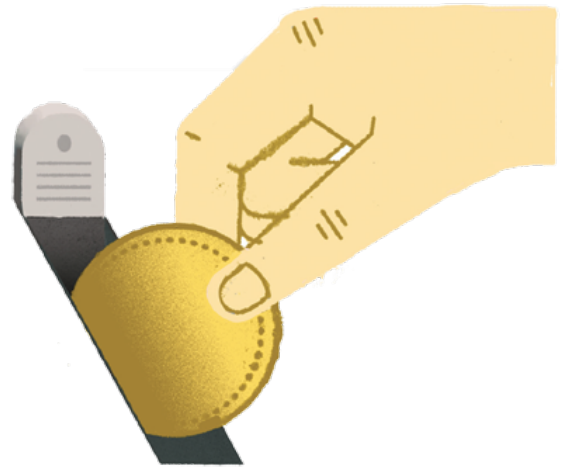
After a disaster, donors to relief funds pay more attention to the death toll than to the needs of survivors.

By [Corey Binns](#) | [Spring 2014](#)

In 2003, the Bam earthquake in Iran killed 26,796 people and left 267,628 survivors. Donors responded by contributing \$10.7 million in disaster relief. In 2000, the Yunnan earthquake in China killed 7 people and affected 1.8 million others—and this time donors gave only \$94,586.

That pattern of disparity is common, says Ioannis Evangelidis, a doctoral candidate in marketing management at the Rotterdam School of Management. Donor behavior in the wake of catastrophic events suggests that donors put less weight on the number of people affected by a disaster than on the number of people who died from it. And that behavior arguably reflects a distorted sense of priorities. “We obviously cannot do much more to help these [deceased] victims,” Evangelidis says.

Evangelidis and Bram Van den Bergh, an assistant professor of management at the Rotterdam



(Illustration by Yarel Waszul)

School of Management, looked at relief donations made in response to 381 natural disasters that occurred between 2000 and 2011. For the study, they used data collected by the [World Health Organization's Center for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters](#). Their comparative analysis of those data revealed that each additional disaster-related death corresponded to a \$9,000 increase in donor contributions.

Certain causes “tug on our heartstrings,” says Deborah Small, a marketing and psychology professor at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. “This article points out that people are wrongly sensitive to death counts, relative to survivor counts. There’s something compelling about fatalities that drives donations to a greater extent than thinking about survivors.”

The tendency to focus on fatalities, Evangelidis argues, becomes a serious problem when a disaster kills relatively few people but leaves many survivors who are in need of assistance. In 2012, newly built shelters helped protect people in Bangladesh from floods. As a result, there were fewer fatalities—but also fewer donations—than there had been after previous flood-related disasters in the region. Survivors had lost everything, yet they received little financial aid. “These people actually need more money than before [the installation of shelters] but end up receiving less,” says Evangelidis.

A similar dynamic applies to droughts, which can cause devastating food shortages while causing relatively few deaths. Indeed, donors’ response to droughts can be particularly weak in comparison with high-fatality disasters. The 2011 tsunami in Japan brought roughly \$1,000 per surviving victim in need, whereas the drought in Uganda that same year garnered only about 40 cents per survivor.

People are generally insensitive to the scope of a problem when it comes to charitable needs, says Cynthia Cryder, an assistant professor of marketing at the Olin Business School at Washington University in St. Louis. Evangelidis and Van den Bergh’s research “uncovered an important instance of when people are in fact sensitive to the scope of a humanitarian problem,” Cryder notes. “In the process, [that research] sheds light on why scope insensitivity occurs in other instances, and how it can be overcome.”

As part of their research, Evangelidis and Van den Bergh also studied the impact of different ways that aid groups communicate with donors. Using descriptions of fictional natural disasters, they surveyed more than 900 participants to find out how people respond to various kinds of

relief appeals. The researchers discovered that using terms such as “people affected” doesn’t help potential donors to appreciate the scope of a charitable need. The use of more specific wording, however, seems to increase donors’ level of responsiveness. In the survey, participants showed a greater willingness to donate money when they learned that a large number of people were “homeless” as a result of a disaster. “The term ‘homeless’ feels more precise and less ambiguous than ‘affected,’ and as such donors rely on it more,” says Evangelidis.

Ioannis Evangelidis and Bram Van den Bergh, “The Number of Fatalities Drives Disaster Aid: Increasing Sensitivity to People in Need,” *Psychological Science*, 24, November 2013.

Corey Binns is a journalist based in Northern California. She writes about science, health, and social change for [NBCNews.com](#), [NPR's Science Friday](#), and [Popular Science](#).

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