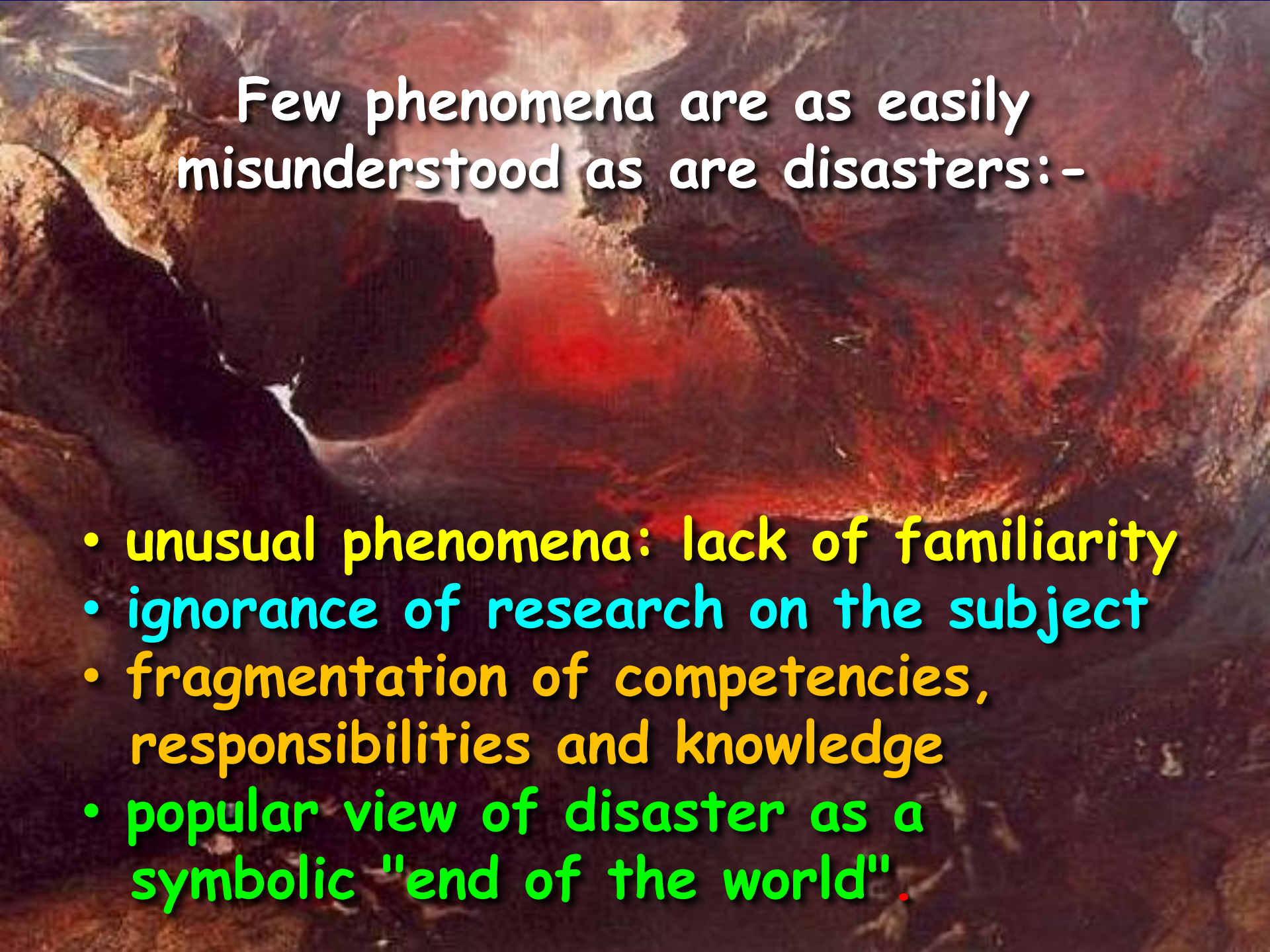




Myths and Misconceptions About Disaster and Their Implications for Emergency Response


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CESPRO - University of Florence





Few phenomena are as easily
misunderstood as are disasters:-

- unusual phenomena: lack of familiarity
- ignorance of research on the subject
- fragmentation of competencies, responsibilities and knowledge
- popular view of disaster as a symbolic "end of the world".



What are the main misconceptions about disaster?

- irrational behaviour (panic)
- antisocial behaviour (looting)
- unreliable emergency responders
- helpless state of disaster victims.

'Myths' of disaster

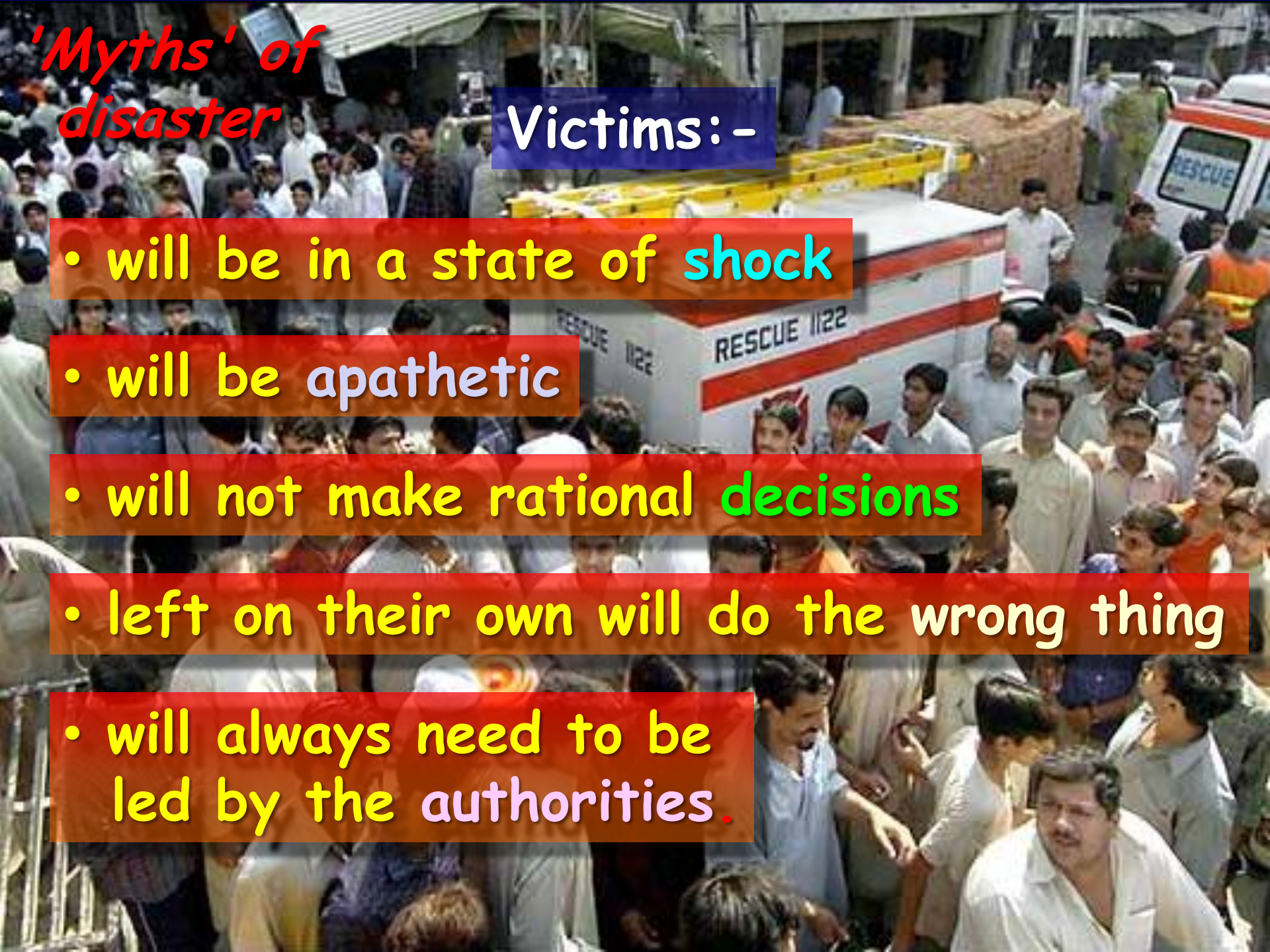
After disaster....

- everyone evacuates and flees the area
- people run frantically out of buildings
- there are mass outbreaks of looting
- people resort to violence to protect their interests
- people who sell needed commodities will raise their prices steeply.

'Myths' of disaster

Victims: -

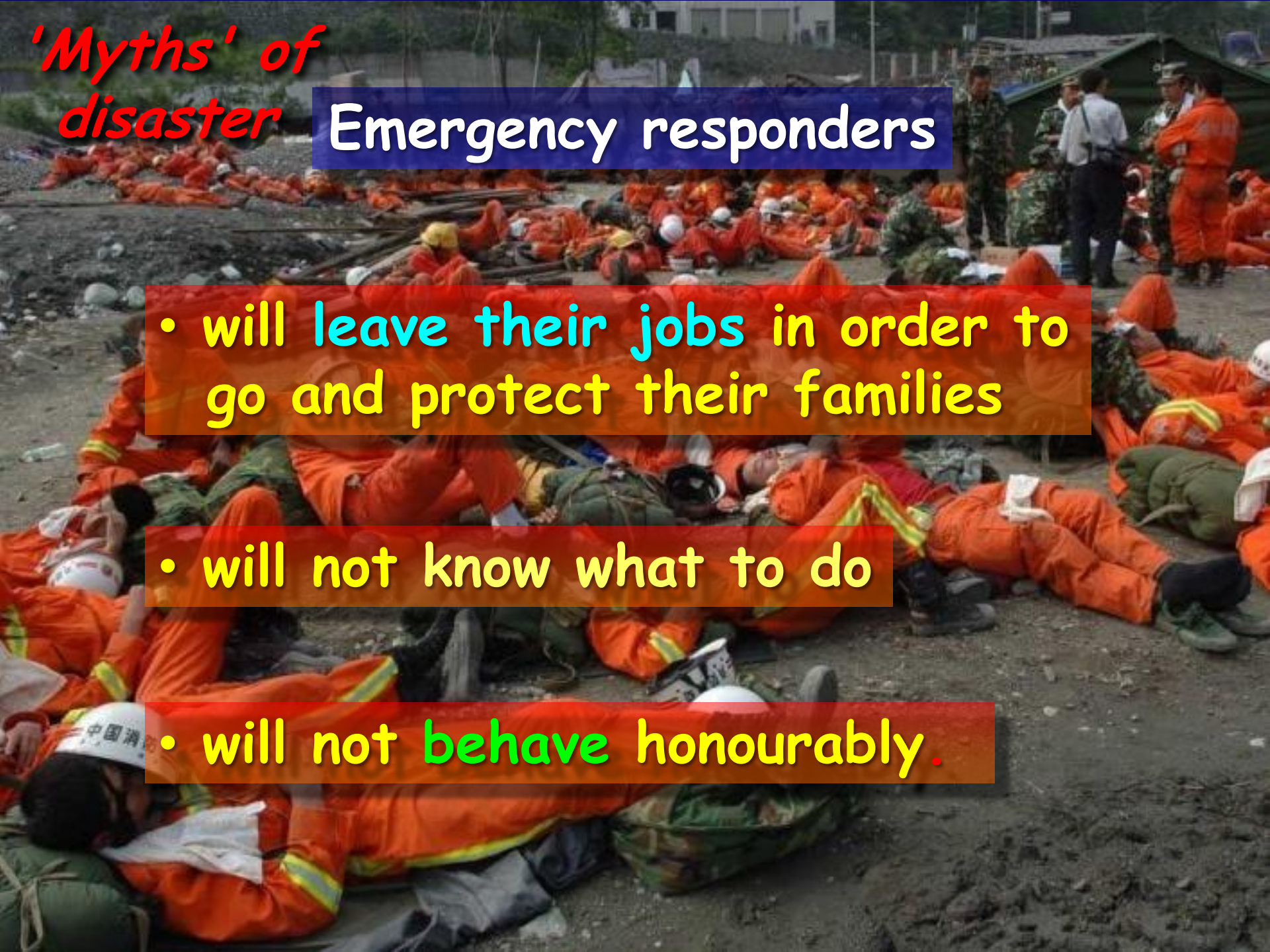
- will be in a state of shock
- will be apathetic
- will not make rational decisions
- left on their own will do the wrong thing
- will always need to be led by the authorities.



'Myths' of disaster

Emergency responders

- will leave their jobs in order to go and protect their families
- will not know what to do
- will not behave honourably.



'Myths' of disaster

Emergency aid

- vast amounts of goods are needed
- almost anything should be donated.



In general:-

'Myths' of disaster

- the mass media create an accurate picture of disaster
- martial law must be imposed to restore order to society
- this requires a strong military presence.

These things *MAY* happen, but in statistical terms they are unlikely to.



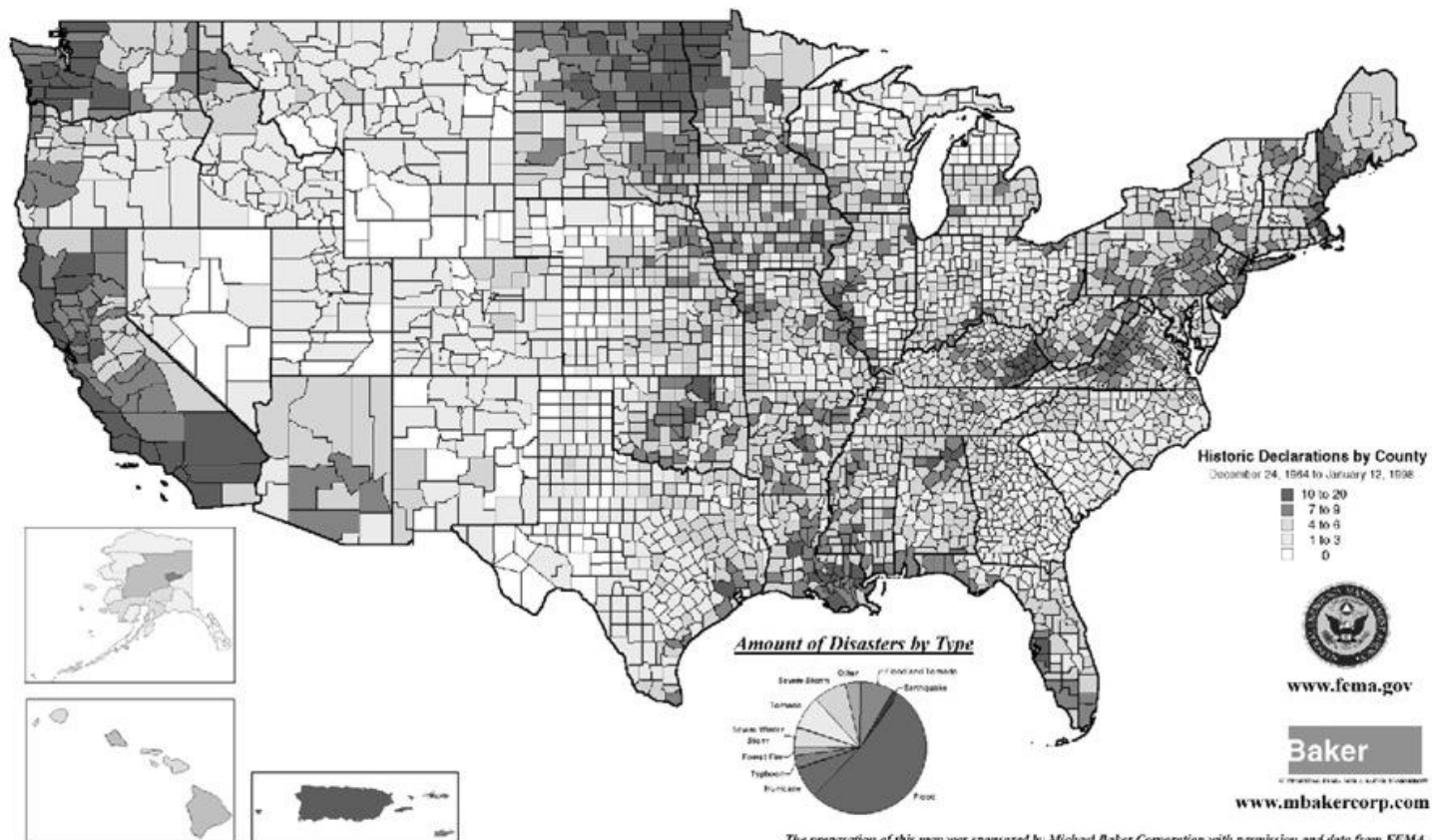


A simple questionnaire study
of different groups, comprising
university students, emergency
responders and military personnel.

First, the propositions...

Myth no. 1: Generally speaking, disasters are truly exceptional events.

HISTORICAL PRESIDENTIAL DISASTER DECLARATIONS 1,198 DECLARATIONS SINCE 1964

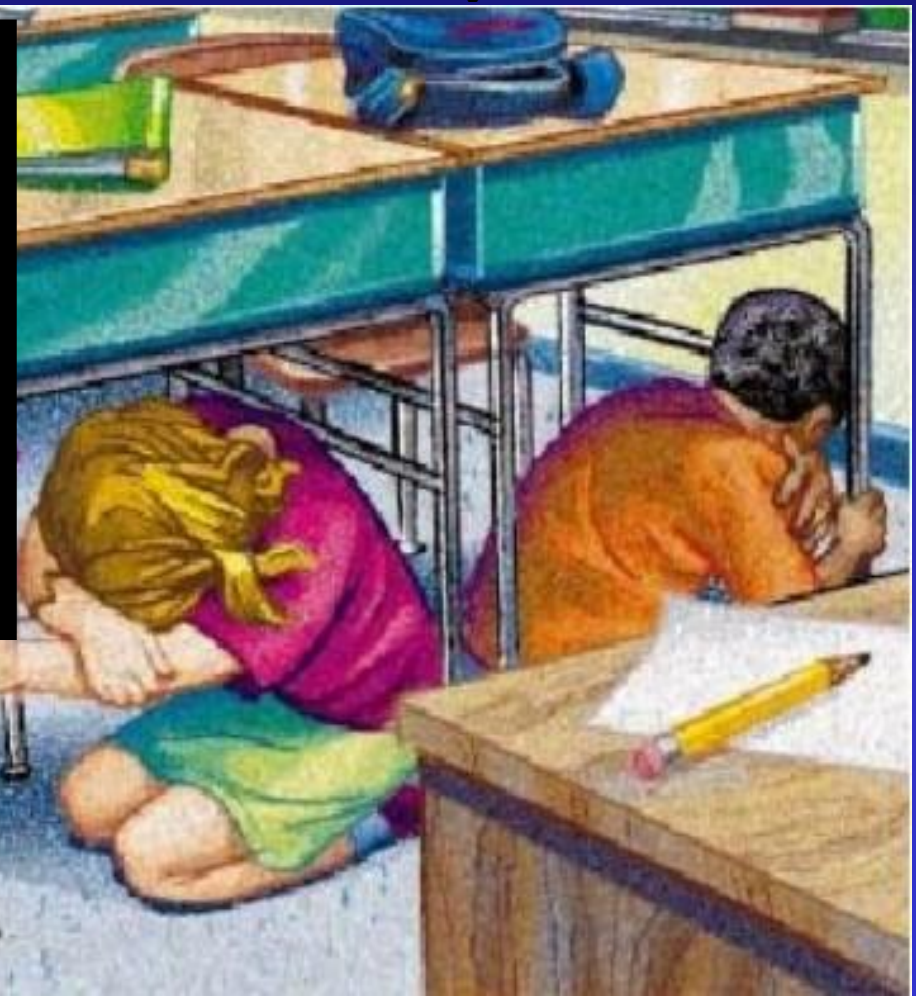


Myth no. 2:

Disasters kill people without respect for social class or economic status.



Myth no. 3:
**Sheltering under a desk offers good
protection against an earthquake.**

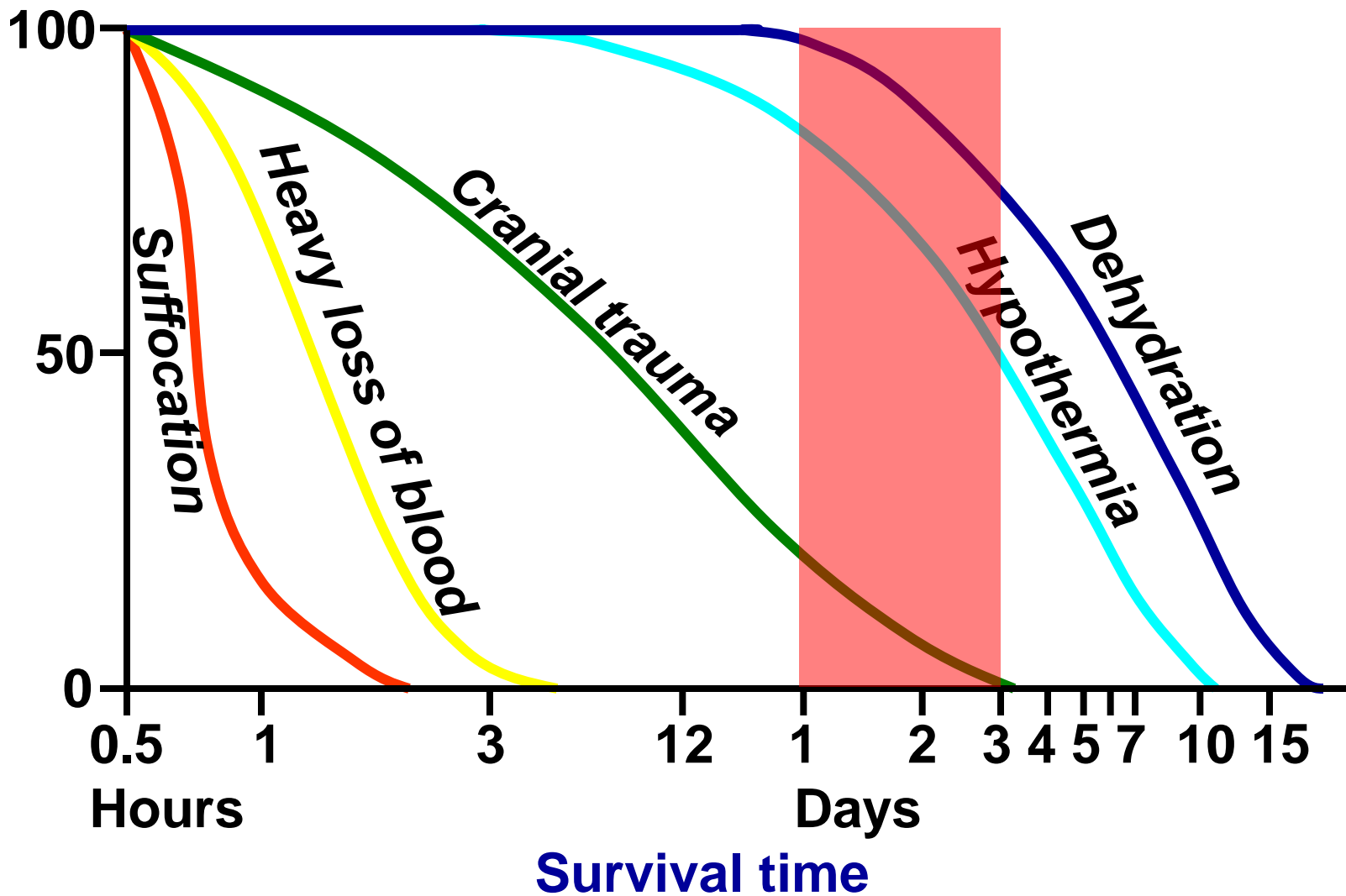


Myth no. 4:

People survive for many days when trapped under the rubble of a collapsed building.



Percentage of people brought out
alive from under collapsed buildings



Myth no. 5:

Disasters cause a great deal of chaos and cannot possibly be managed systematically.



Myth no. 6:

Usually, the first relief after disaster is given by the emergency services.



Myth no. 7:

Usually, there is a shortage of resources after disaster and this stops the crisis from being managed well.



Myth no. 8:
One should donate used clothes
to the victims of disasters.



Myth no. 9:

Companies, corporations, associations and governments are always very generous when invited to send aid to disaster areas.



Myth no. 10:
When disaster strikes
panic is a common reaction.



Myth no. 11:
People will flee in large numbers
from a disaster area.



Myth no. 12:
**After disaster has struck, people
tend to be dazed and apathetic.**



Myth no. 13:

Disasters commonly give rise to spontaneous manifestations of antisocial, behaviour, such as outbreaks of looting.



Instead we have the therapeutic community

Myth no. 14:

Unburied dead bodies constitute a health hazard and will contaminate water supplies.

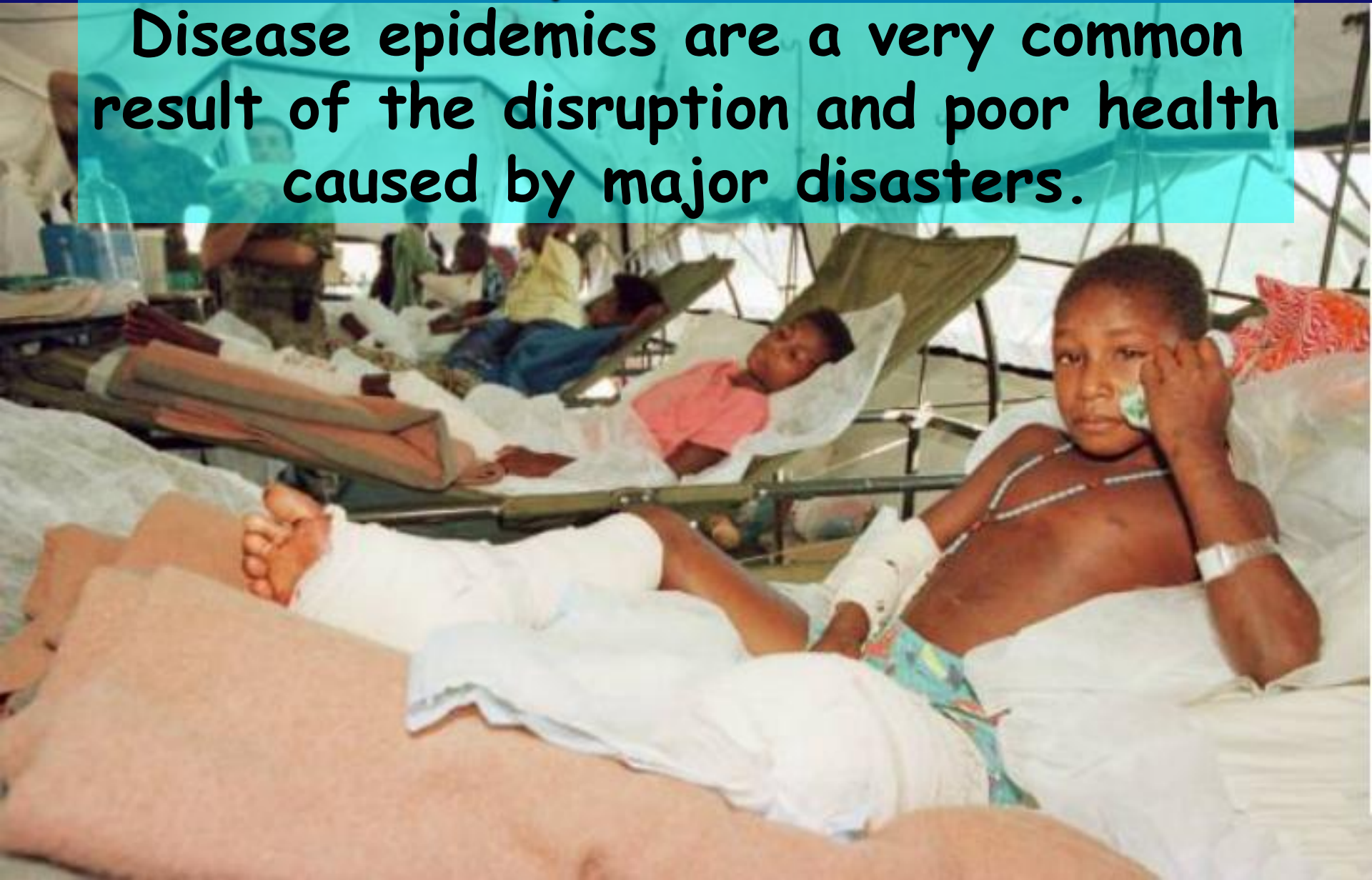




The mass media continually state that the presence of unburied bodies after disaster can cause disease epidemics.

Myth no. 15:

Disease epidemics are a very common result of the disruption and poor health caused by major disasters.



Myth no. 16:

Field hospitals are useful for the treatment of the injured.



Myth no. 17:

Great quantities and assortments of medicines should be sent to disaster areas.



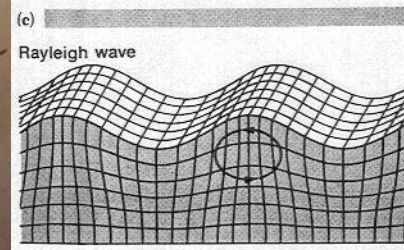
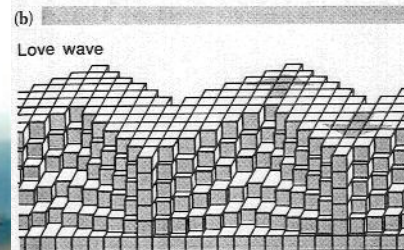
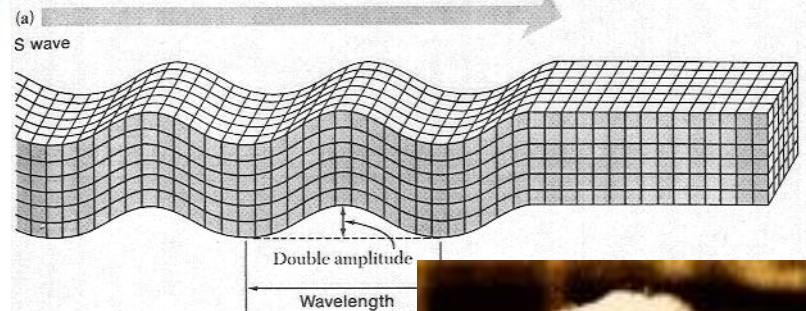
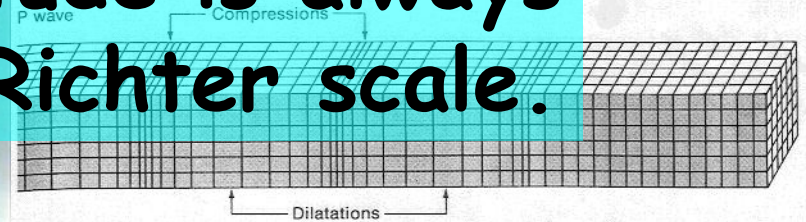
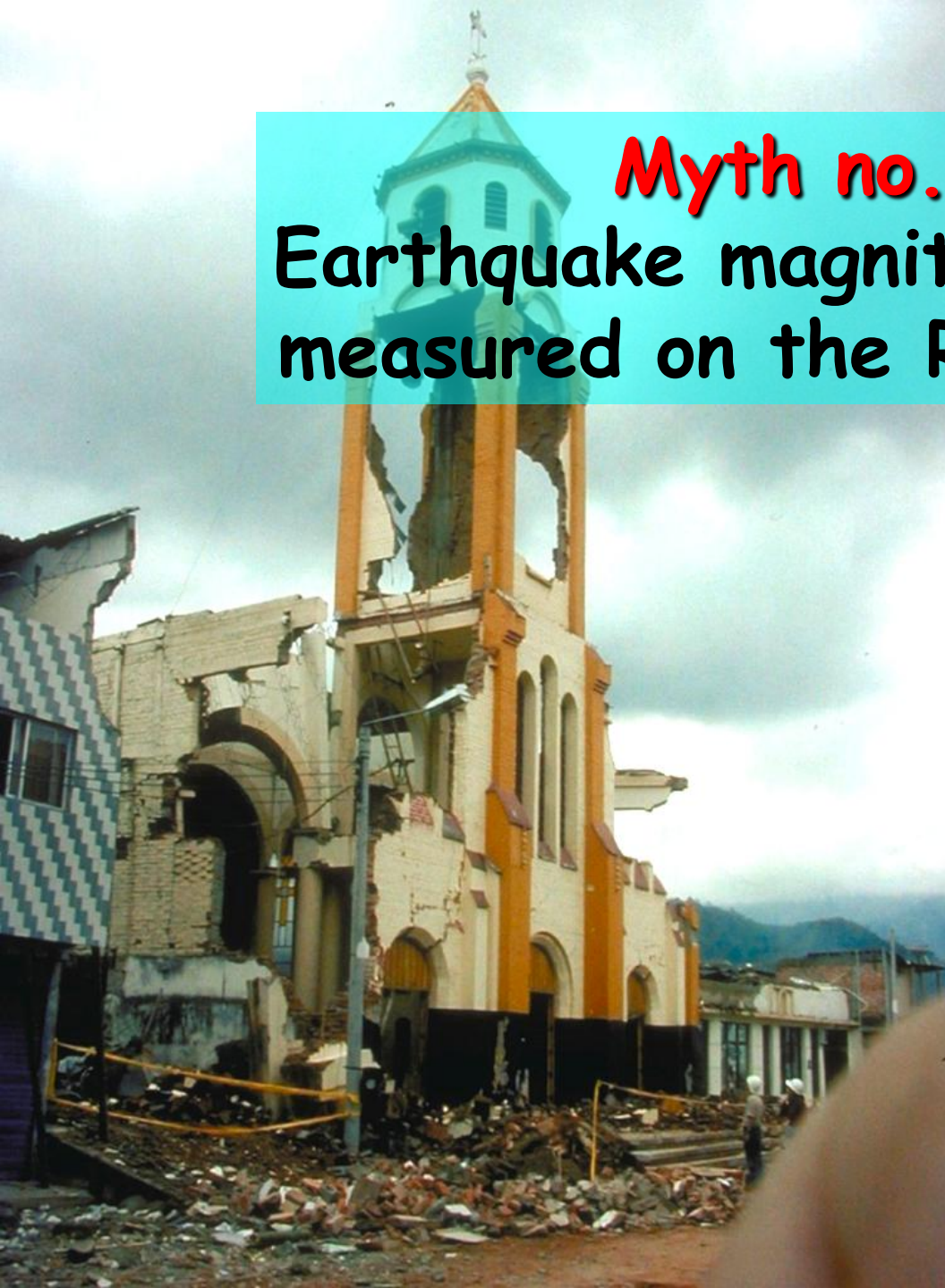
Myth no. 18:
**Technology will save the world
from disasters.**



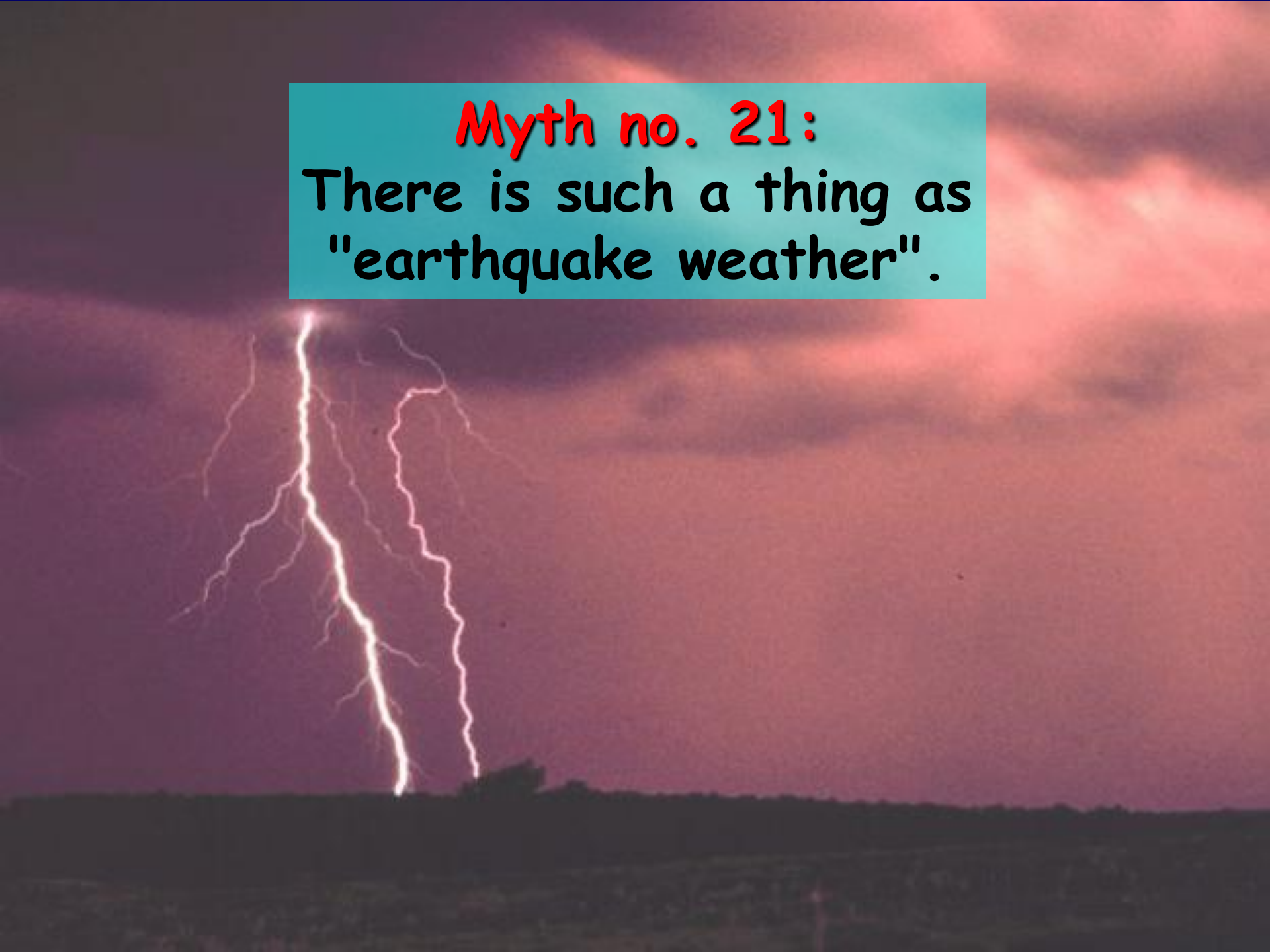
Myth no. 19:
Tsunamis are tidal waves.



Myth no. 20:
Earthquake magnitude is always
measured on the Richter scale.



Myth no. 21:
There is such a thing as
"earthquake weather".





Tsunami hazard in Scotland

Volcanic eruption hazard in Germany

**Earthquake hazard in Belgium,
the Irish Sea, London, central England**

CBRN terrorism hazard anywhere.

disasters
someone else.
2
Myth
always happ

**Obligation
to inform
the public**



**Emergency
and disaster
managers**



**Public information
centres; warnings
and alerts;
informing the
relatives of victims**

**Mutual
antipathy
or
collaborative
relationship?**

**Editorial
independence
and freedom**



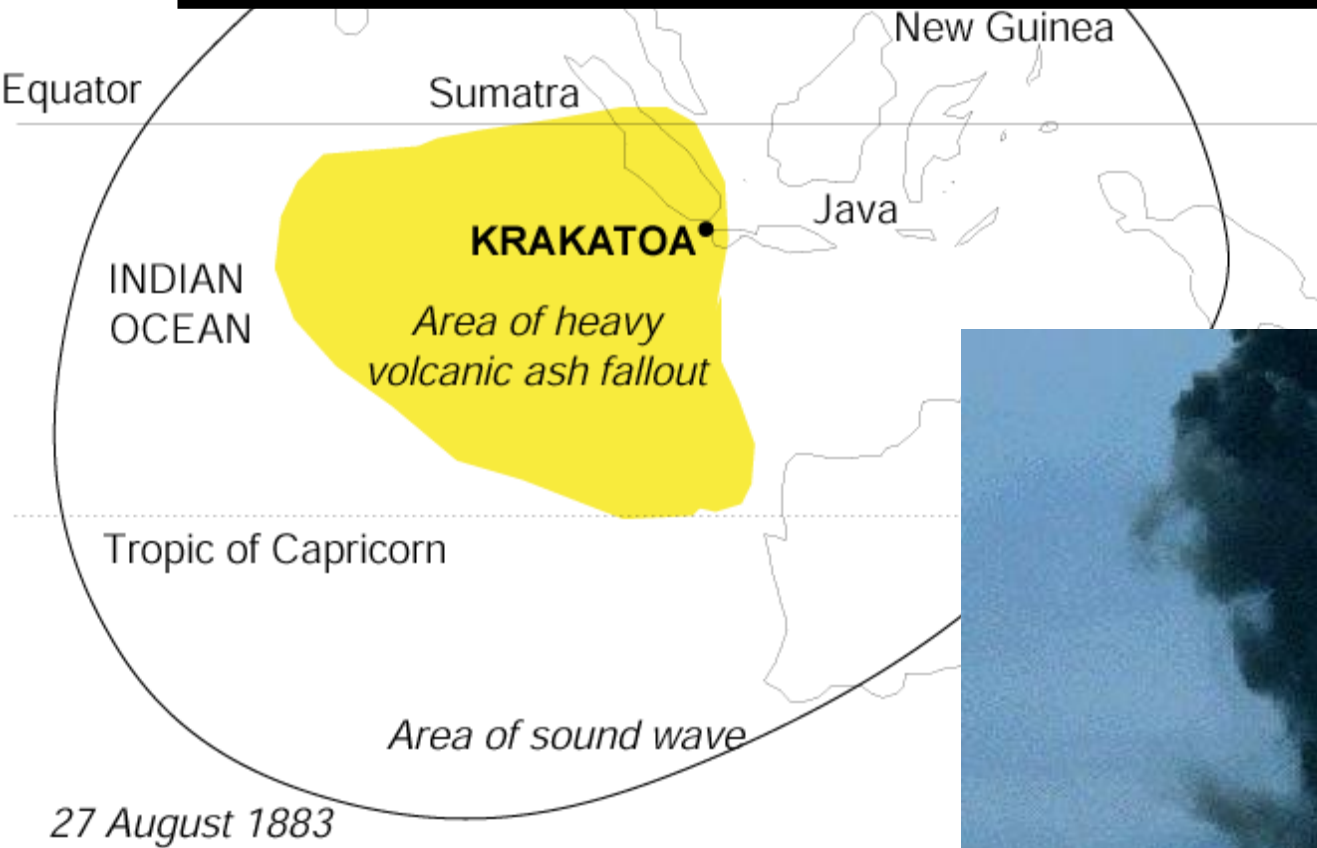
**Representatives
of the mass
media**



**Sales and
ratings;
reputation;
revenue from
advertising**

Tropic of Cancer

Our image of disasters is conditioned far too much by Hollywood!





The Hollywood
view of disaster

The journalist's
view of disaster

What is
disaster?

The emergency
responder's
view of disaster

The scientist's
view of disaster

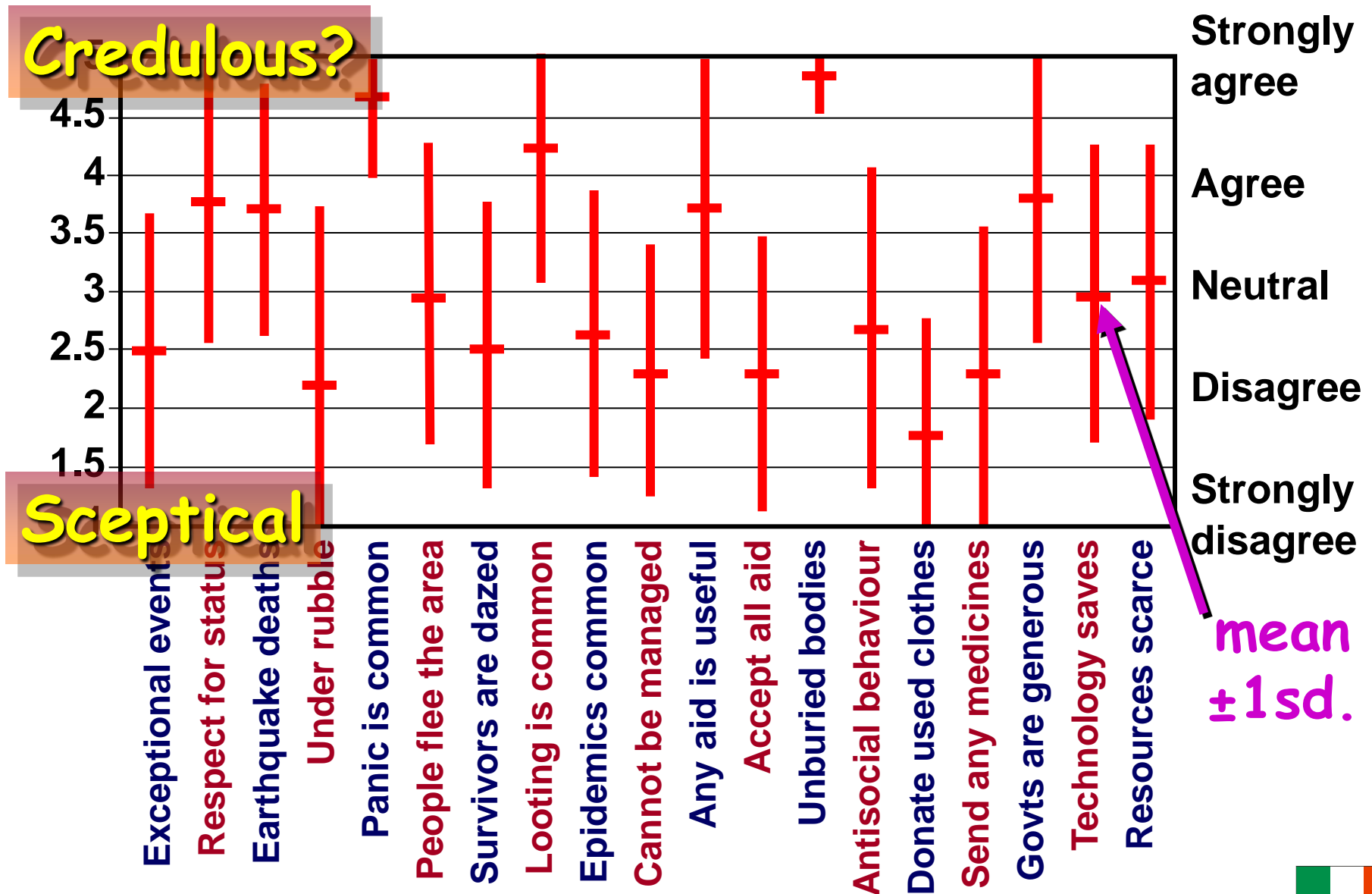
Research investigation disaster managers' perceptions



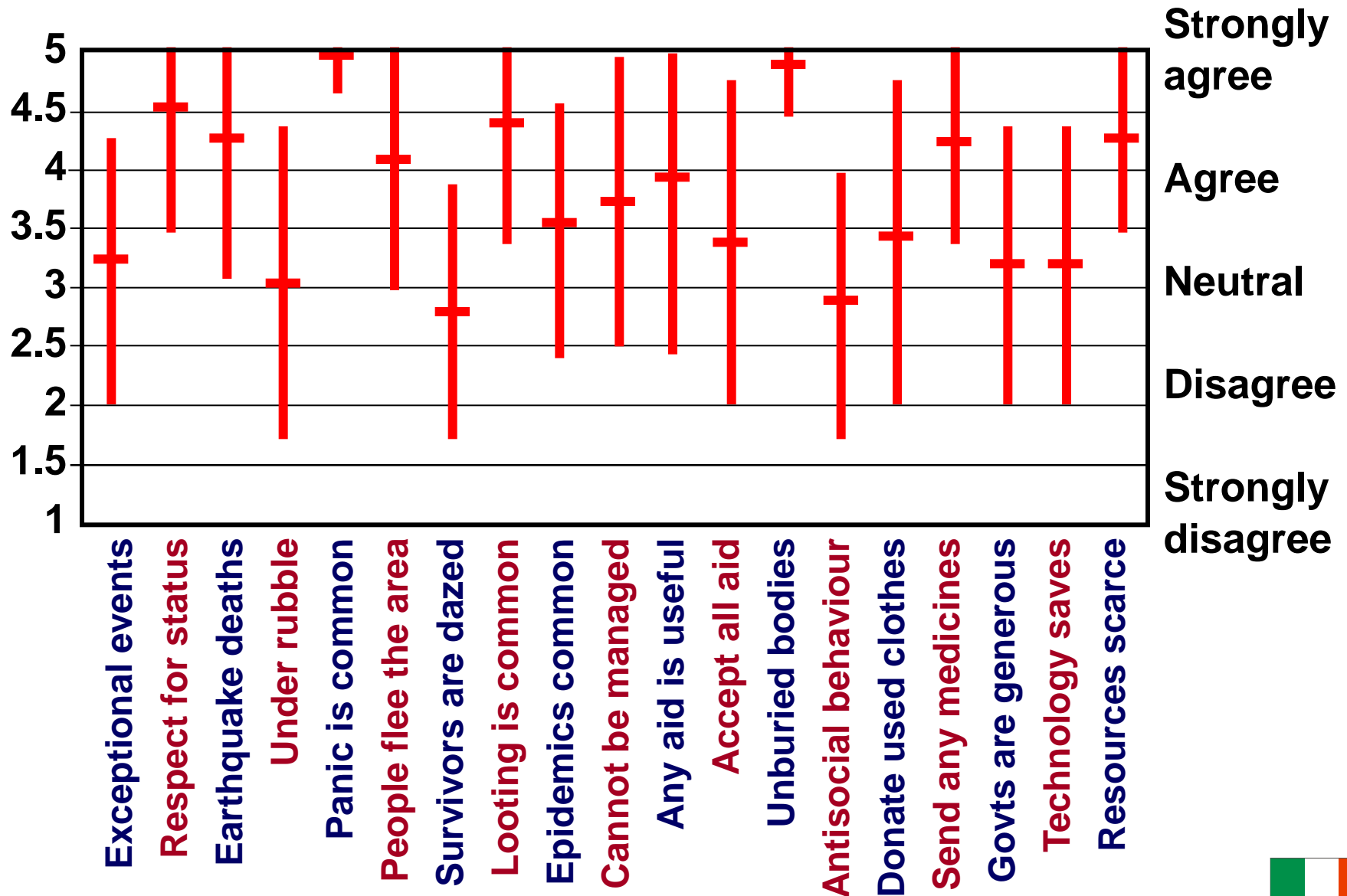
DISASTER MYTHS

- survive herculean attempts to debunk them
- represent a hurdle that the educator must overcome before progress can be made with the basics of disaster studies
- their persistence is one possible measure of the ineffectiveness of education and training.

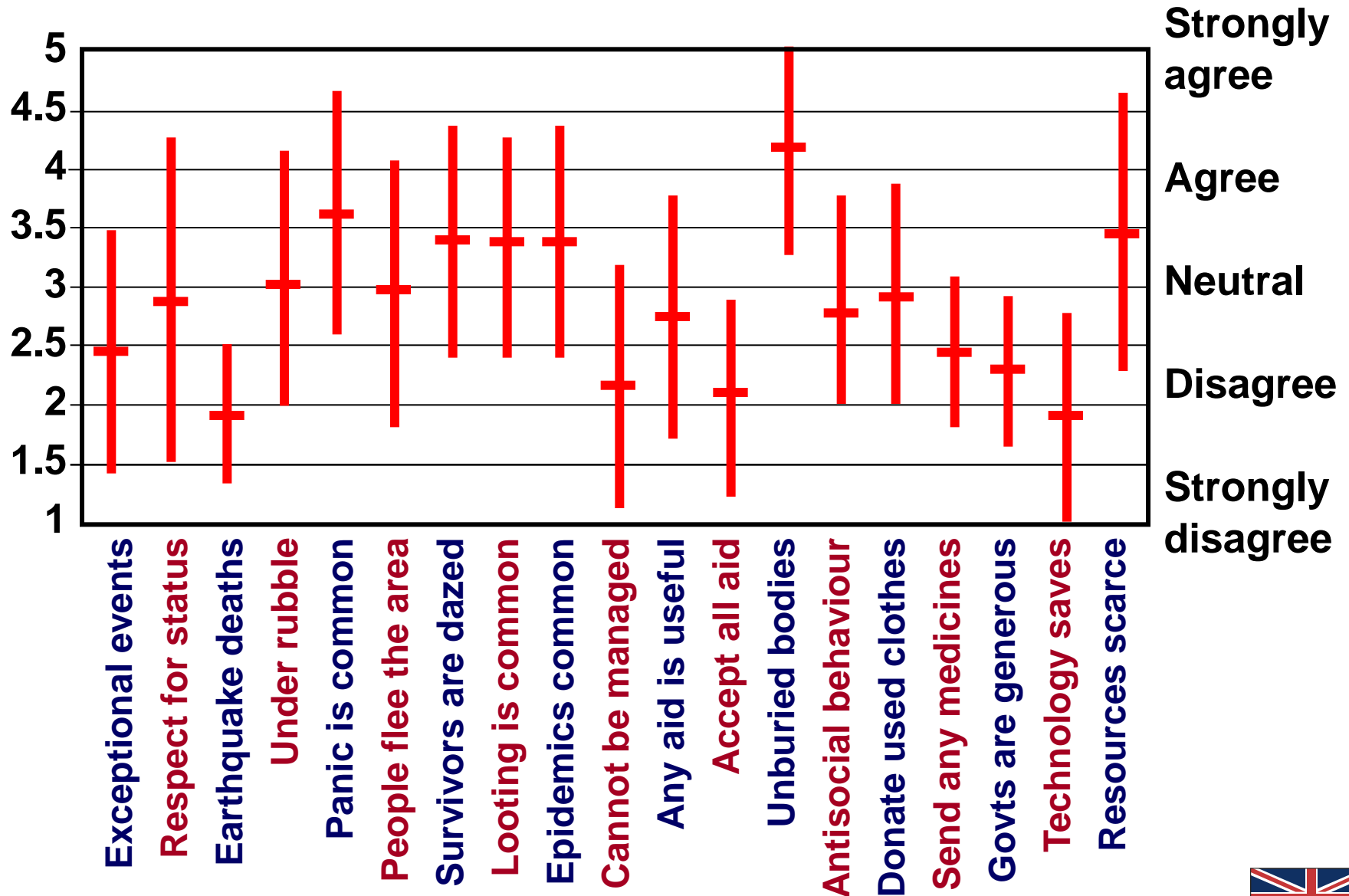
Disaster managers - Province of Florence
















Emergency nurses - Middle Arno Valley



Military Commanders - MSc Course (UK)



Groups surveyed - SCEPTICISM INDEX:		n	score
Middle Arno Valley emergency nurses		33	3.74
Cranfield Global Security MSc students		6	3.47
Univ. of Massachusetts undergrads (1)		185	3.39
Municipal Civil Protection Group, Tuscany		19	3.35
Univ. of Massachusetts undergrads (2)		206	3.27
Master of Defence Admin. students		10	3.15
Province of Florence emergency mgrs		21	3.11
Univ. of Massachusetts post-grads (1)		15	3.01
Region of Lombardy emergency mgrs		29	2.95
RMCS Military Masters students		23	2.83
Univ. of Florence MSc Civil Protection		18	2.81
Univ. of Massachusetts post-grads (2)		9	2.77
Cranfield Univ. MSc Disaster Mgt		15	2.38

Low score = high scepticism -->

Is there any consensus among the groups?

Definite agreement



- Panic is common after disaster.
- Looting is common after disaster.
- Unburied bodies are a health hazard.

Some agreement

- Disasters don't respect victims' status.
- People tend to flee the disaster area.
- Epidemics are common after disaster.
- Any aid is useful.



Conclusions

- Myths and misconceptions about catastrophes are widespread, deeply rooted and dearly held, even among students and professionals in the field
- Experience, knowledge and training lead to scepticism about the 'myths'
- The professional respondents all had definite reactions to the propositions.

Category	"Myth"	Reality
People involved in disaster	act irrationally, panic and run away	act rationally, decide reasonably and remain
Community response	looting, deviance and selfishness	crime levels fall and altruism prevails
Emergency workers	will not report for work or will go away	often stay too long
Victims	are in shock and are helpless	are self-sufficient and creative
Shelter	is needed for everyone	victims stay with friends and relatives
Mass media	report accurately and completely	report inaccurately and incompletely
Aid and relief	is always needed	may or may not be required
Martial law	is necessary	is inappropriate

Emergency responders are also
members of the public.

As such they may to some degree
believe in the "myths" of disaster.



If it is not counteracted by training
and experience, this can lead to
wrong decisions and inadvisable actions.

Misconception as a Barrier to Teaching about Disasters

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Abstract

Introduction: This paper is a report on an exercise designed to reveal the extent of belief in the common myths about disasters held by members of four groups of students from the University of Massachusetts and three groups of trainee emergency workers from Italy.

Methods: A questionnaire was administered in which students and trainees were asked to agree or disagree with 19 statements about disasters. These statements were based on common misconceptions about disasters and are at least statements untenable in statistical terms, if not downright wrong. In each case, a Likert scale was used to assess the strength of the students' and trainees' agreement or disagreement with the statements.

Results: The results suggest that some of the misconceptions (for example, that panic and looting are widespread reactions to disaster) were strongly held, whereas others (for instance, that disasters cannot be managed) were less



HAPPY GNOMELAND SECURITY
AND BUON NATALE

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