

REVISITING THE U.S. EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT SYSTEM: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE MONOGRAPH *U.S. EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT IN THE 21ST CENTURY: FROM DISASTER TO CATASTROPHE* BY THE BOOK'S AUTHORS CUTTER, GALL, AND RUBIN

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Abstract: The monograph *U.S. Emergency Management in the 21st Century: From Disaster to Catastrophe*, published in 2025, examines the current structure, functioning, and limitations of the U.S. emergency management system at a time of escalating emergencies and crises. The authors combine empirical case studies (e.g., Hurricane Katrina, major tornadoes, and extensive wildfires in California) with an analysis of crisis management responses to these emergencies and disasters. In doing so, they evaluate the development of crisis policy in the United States, the role of FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency), the National Incident Management System (NIMS), and mechanisms of multi-level governance. From a legislative, legal, and institutional perspective, the monograph highlights the fragmentation of authority and the challenges associated with achieving effective integration in the absence of a unified legal framework. As such, the publication provides a valuable comparative basis for the study of integrated emergency response systems in other countries, including the Czech Republic. Although the monograph is positively evaluated for its clear writing style and empirical depth, it has also been criticized for its limited theoretical innovation and its more descriptive than explanatory analytical approach.

Keywords: Emergency management, integrated rescue system, U.S. emergency system, soft integration, formal integration, multi-level governance, Federal emergency management (FEMA), National Incident Management System (NIMS), comparative analysis, risk governance, disaster resilience, institutional fragmentation

1 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND THEORETICAL FOCUS

The authors adopt the "hazard-risk-vulnerability" paradigm as the primary interpretative framework for understanding the emergency management system in the United States. Contemporary disasters are therefore understood not merely as natural phenomena, but as sociotechnical processes shaped by demographic development, land-use patterns, infrastructure, and public administration structures.

This perspective aligns the monograph with broader developments in disaster management theory, which has gradually shifted from a reactive and event-driven model toward a systemic understanding emphasizing resilience, preparedness, mitigation, and adaptive capacity.

The monograph relies primarily on an applied conceptual framework rather than on the development of an original theoretical model. The authors draw upon established concepts such as risk governance, institutional resilience, and multi-level governance. As a result, the book remains accessible to practitioners and policymakers; however, this accessibility somewhat limits its theoretical contribution.

Readers with legal or political science backgrounds will appreciate the publication's normative insights, although the text contains relatively few clearly defined analytical categories regarding institutional, legal, or organizational barriers in emergency management.

2 METHODOLOGY AND EMPIRICAL CERTAINTY

The methodological approach of the monograph can best be described as a case-study-oriented policy analysis.

The book examines numerous major disasters, including tornadoes (Joplin, Tuscaloosa-Birmingham, Moore), hurricanes (Sandy, Harvey, Irma, Maria), and California wildfires. These cases form the empirical basis for evaluating both the successes and failures of the U.S. emergency management system.

The use of case studies enables the authors to provide contextually rich insights into interactions among local, state,

and federal institutions, including FEMA, NIMS, and the Incident Command System (ICS). Nevertheless, the monograph also demonstrates several methodological limitations.

Case selection appears influenced primarily by media visibility and political significance rather than by a systematically defined sampling strategy. Consequently, the analysis risks overemphasizing highly publicized disasters while underrepresenting smaller yet structurally important emergencies.

Moreover, the integration of qualitative and quantitative data remains largely descriptive and is not sufficiently incorporated into a coherent analytical framework. The publication also fails to employ comparative case-study logic capable of isolating causal mechanisms behind successful or unsuccessful emergency responses.

From a critical academic perspective, the empirical strength of the publication lies primarily in the richness of its narrative and the policy-relevant lessons it offers, rather than in its contribution to rigorous causal explanation.

3 LEGAL AND GOVERNANCE ARCHITECTURE OF CRISIS MANAGEMENT

From the perspective of public law, the publication provides a valuable, albeit somewhat implicit, critique of the American legal framework for emergency management.

The authors repeatedly emphasize the fragmentation of authority among federal, state, and local actors, as well as the tensions between legal competence, institutional practice, and political responsibility.

Particularly significant is the analysis of FEMA's evolving role, which demonstrates how policy changes during the Trump administration contributed to the institutional weakening of the federal emergency management system's capabilities, including reductions in staffing capacity and strategic preparedness.

The publication implicitly addresses key public law concepts such as subsidiarity, federalism, and accountability; however, these concepts are not systematically theorized. A more legally focused analysis might have explored questions concerning the enforceability of federal obligations, judicial review of discretionary emergency decisions, or compensation mechanisms following catastrophic events.

Consequently, the monograph functions more as a sociological and policy-oriented analysis than as a fully developed legal-institutional study, despite providing substantial material for further legal interpretation.

4 ESTABLISHMENT OF AN INTEGRATED RESCUE SYSTEM

Throughout the monograph, the authors repeatedly emphasize the importance of interagency coordination, information sharing, and unified command structures based on NIMS and ICS. At the same time, however, they point to the persistent operational limitations of these systems during real-time emergency response operations.

The publication documents recurring problems related to interagency communication, overlapping jurisdictions, and differing levels of preparedness and training among participating agencies.

Conceptually, the book implicitly aligns with the understanding of an integrated emergency response system as a network of

formally distinct yet functionally interdependent actors. Nevertheless, it does not define this concept with the same degree of terminological precision characteristic of Czech legislation governing the Integrated Rescue System.

The American emergency management framework can therefore be described as functionally integrated but formally fragmented. From the perspective of comparative legal analysis, the publication thus provides valuable indirect evidence regarding the extent to which integration may be achieved through governance mechanisms, operational coordination, and institutional practice rather than through a unified legal structure.

5 STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE PUBLICATION

For researchers and experts engaged in the comparative study of emergency management and integrated rescue systems, the principal strengths of the monograph lie in its empirical depth and policy-oriented analytical approach.

The publication provides a detailed and up-to-date account of the functioning of a highly decentralized emergency management system operating under conditions of increasing environmental and societal risk. The inclusion of recent disasters — particularly Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico and the California wildfires — adds significant contemporary relevance to the analysis and illustrates the adaptation pressures confronting modern emergency management systems.

The concluding chapters of the monograph are explicitly devoted to identifying the shortcomings of the current system and outlining possible directions for future reform.

The authors identify three major interconnected challenges facing the United States:

1. the increasing scale and frequency of catastrophic events;
2. the institutional weakening of the federal emergency management system's capabilities; and
3. growing inequalities in societal vulnerability and post-disaster recovery outcomes.

In response to these challenges, the authors advocate for a more adaptive, resilient, and equitable emergency management system. They emphasize the necessity of long-term investments in mitigation strategies, community preparedness, and integrated recovery planning.

From a critical scholarly perspective, several aspects of this policy agenda deserve closer examination.

First, the authors' criticism of federal austerity measures occasionally appears politically prescriptive rather than analytically neutral. While this rhetorical approach strengthens the publication's persuasive impact, it simultaneously weakens the methodological objectivity expected from an academic monograph.

Second, the proposed reforms remain predominantly programmatic and insufficiently institutionalized. The authors repeatedly call for improved coordination, enhanced planning mechanisms, and stronger community engagement; however, they do not adequately elaborate on the legislative, administrative, or budgetary instruments necessary to implement these objectives effectively.

At the same time, the limitations of the publication are equally significant. The relatively limited degree of theoretical innovation, uneven methodological rigor, and insufficient engagement with legal-institutional analysis reduce the monograph's value as a standalone source for advanced comparative legal research.

The publication is therefore best understood as a supplementary analytical resource illustrating the operational reality of a highly

fragmented yet operationally interconnected emergency management system, rather than as a comprehensive doctrinal or theoretical work.

For scholars focusing on the Czech Integrated Rescue System, the monograph primarily serves as a comparative reference point illustrating the contrast between a legally integrated but operationally complex system and a system that is operationally integrated but legally fragmented.

For readers familiar with public law theory, the book ultimately functions more as a diagnostic manifesto concerning the present condition of American emergency management than as a detailed institutional blueprint for reform.

6 OVERALL EVALUATION AND SCIENTIFIC CONTRIBUTION OF THE MONOGRAPH

Overall, *U.S. Emergency Management in the 21st Century: From Disaster to Catastrophe* represents a timely and intellectually relevant — albeit ultimately introductory, contribution to the academic and professional literature on emergency management.

Its principal value lies in synthesizing a broad spectrum of empirical evidence into a coherent account of the systemic vulnerabilities and institutional pathologies characterizing the U.S. emergency management system.

The publication successfully demonstrates the urgency of structural reform while simultaneously making the highly specialized field of emergency management more accessible to a broader audience, including students, practitioners, and policymakers.

From a critical academic perspective, however, the monograph does not provide a fully theorized, methodologically rigorous, or legally explicit analysis of the fundamental structures of emergency management governance.

For legal scholars interested in the comparative architecture of integrated emergency response systems, the publication should therefore be regarded primarily as a valuable empirical supplement suitable for secondary analysis — particularly in comparison with other national systems, including the Czech Integrated Rescue System — rather than as an independent theoretical foundation.

Despite these limitations, the monograph remains a useful and intellectually stimulating contribution to contemporary discussions concerning crisis governance, institutional resilience, and the future evolution of emergency management systems in democratic states.

Literature:

1. CUTTER, Susan L.; GALL, Melanie a RUBIN, Claire B. *U.S. emergency management in the 21st century: from disaster to catastrophe*. 2nd edition. New York, NY: Routledge, 2025. ISBN 978-1032970509.

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