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### The Rise of Prepping in New York City: Community Resilience and COVID-19

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## **The Rise of Prepping in New York City: Community Resilience and COVID-19**

## **The Rise of Prepping in New York City: Community Resilience and COVID-19**

### **Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic's brutal impact on New York City has laid bare the social inequalities and injustices of living in a global capital. As the first epicenter of the pandemic in the US, New York has endured more than 215,000 confirmed cases, and over 23,000 deaths, representing 8% of the country's confirmed cases, 18% of deaths domestically, and 5% globally (Partnership for New York City, July 2020). At the height of the pandemic, the city's unemployment rate was 19.8% (nearly 1.6 million unemployment applications filed) and is projected to average 10.9% in 2021 (Partnership for New York City, June 2020). Lost tax revenue in the state and the city will exceed \$37 billion in the next two fiscal years (New York State Department of Labor, 2020).

When the number of COVID-19 hospitalizations in New York peaked in April, Governor Andrew Cuomo, quoting Winston Churchill, said, "This is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning " (Gallo, 2020). In addition to age, race and income are the most significant factors in determining one's chances for surviving the pandemic (Schwartz & Cook, 2020). For New York, an analysis of COVID-19 deaths by ZIP code indicated that the highest death rates were in low-income neighborhoods with disproportionate numbers of Black and Latinx people (New York City Health Department, 2020). Blacks and Latinx were hospitalized and dying at twice the rate of White and Asian residents (Mays & Newman, 2020). In the city's COVID-19 epicenter of Central Queens, the virus has disproportionately affected working-class immigrants in these communities (Amandolare et al, 2020).

Within these diverse immigrant communities, infection rates escalated among residents due to factors including preexisting chronic conditions, no health insurance, language barriers, crowded housing, working high-exposure essential jobs, and high unemployment rates. Conversely, Manhattan had the lowest death rates. At the start of the pandemic, the residential population of the borough's wealthiest neighborhoods like the Upper East Side, Soho, the West Village, and Brooklyn Heights decreased by 40% or more (Quealy, 2020). As Inez Barron, a city councilwoman whose Brooklyn district includes the ZIP code with the highest death rate in the city, observed, "We may all be in the same storm, but we're all not in the same boat" (Schwartz & Cook, 2020).

In advance of the pandemic, New York preppers, were already prepared with the necessary protective equipment to shield themselves from the virus and with ample food provisions for sheltering in place. What motivated these New Yorkers to prepare extensively for disaster? How did they learn disaster preparedness? What can their preparedness teach disaster management and non-profit professionals about community resilience? This qualitative study explores how the rise of prepping in New York is an act of community resilience that seeks to strengthen social networks and overcome the inequitable distribution of resources during disaster. By analyzing the mission and activities of the New York City's Prepper's Network (NYCPN), the city's only public urban prepping group, this ethnographic study examines the organization's use of social capital and networks in preparing for disaster. Therefore, this research aims to advance the understanding of social infrastructure's critical role in supporting resiliency (Aldrich & Meyer, 2015). As the NYCPN's leader, Jason Charles, explained about the group, "Look, as preppers, we aren't freaked out about the pandemic. This is something that we

have trained for. We already know how to shelter in place. We have our provisions. We know what to do.”

Prepping is the practice adopted by individuals who prepare and plan to independently survive disaster (and sustain themselves) in a context of scarce food, dwindling supplies, and without government assistance (Mills, 2018; Perry, 2006; Reinhardt, 2017). With dwindling faith in the promise of government aid during disasters, these New Yorkers have turned to self-reliance and social bonds to ensure their safety. This study seeks to examine disaster preparedness through a different lens—the work of citizens rather than the work of institutions. By analyzing the process of and rationale behind why New Yorker preppers prepare for disasters, we can see how community members actually practice resilience. Their belief in self-reliance, approaches to survival (sheltering in place or leaving the city), gathering resources (supplies and skills) and networking to strengthen their abilities all point to important principles of social justice and community resilience. Their objectives mirror the definition of community resilience as “the capacity to anticipate risk, limit impact, and bounce back rapidly through survival, adaptability, evolution, and growth in the face of turbulent change” (Plodinec, 2009). Given this focus on community, this research answers the call to expand disaster management research beyond studying problems relevant mainly to institutions responsible for managing disasters and, instead, examines issues of social inequality, societal diversity, and social change (Tierney, 2007).

For disaster management planning, examining the mission and activities of the NYCPN provides insight into local knowledge, resources, and community networks. In analyzing how NYCPN members were prepared for the pandemic, this research reveals the power of community in mobilizing for disaster. This study contributes to the community resilience literature by

examining how a group conceptualizes its vulnerabilities and works to overcome these challenges independent of government support. Urban prepper groups may also draw on this research as a useful tool in modeling or revising organizational activities to improve preparedness.

The rise of prepping in New York is not a phenomenon that can be analyzed solely according to the national political context. Rather, urban prepping is about adapting to the changing nature of life as a city dweller. It is about local, everyday choices, planning for the future, and thinking about community. As explained by one *New York Times* reader in the comments section about the impact of COVID-19 on New York: “Being a New Yorker takes work.” What is the work of community resilience? Norris et al. (2007) argue that:

To build collective resilience, communities must reduce risk and resource inequities, engage local people in mitigation, create organizational linkages, boost and protect social supports, and plan for not having a plan, which requires flexibility, decision-making skills, and trusted sources of information that function in the face of unknowns (p. 127).

To better understand urban prepping as a process for helping communities to plan and respond to disaster, this analysis draws on Faulkner, Brown, and Quinn’s (2018) framework of five capacities for community resilience: place attachment; leadership; knowledge and learning; community networks; and community cohesion and efficacy. Place attachment refers to the emotional, intellectual, and physical relationships that people have with place (Lewicka, 2011). It may bolster community resilience by motivating adaptation to maintain valued qualities of place (Amundsen, 2013) or undermine adaptation through resistance to new ideas and approaches (Marshall, 2007). Leadership is a process that encompasses individuals, organizations, roles, and actions that influence outcomes. The presence or absence of leadership impacts the development

of critical components such as knowledge and trust building needed for resilience (Case et al., 2015). Knowledge and learning refer to individual and group capacity to respond to local needs and issues (Maclean et al., 2014). This capacity involves learning new types of knowledge to improve responding to change (Magis, 2010) as well as learning from past crisis to strengthen social memory (Wilson, 2012). Community networks involve the bonding and linking of ties that allow people to act collectively (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). Establishing ties across diverse networks strengthens community resilience by opening up new outlets for support and resources as well as providing a renewed optimism during challenging times (Maclean et al., 2014). Community cohesion and efficacy represents a community's ability to perform a task and manage prospective situations (Brown & Westaway, 2011). It centers on a community's sense of agency and its ability to develop its own level of resilience (Magis, 2010).

In the urban context, public education about disaster preparedness is made more complex by the diversity and distribution of vulnerable groups throughout a city (Paton and Johnston, 2001). Yet, the NYCPN has successfully linked intention to action in preparedness among its members (Dekens, 2007). Using Faulkner, Brown, and Quinn's framework to study the NYCPN is strategic because its categories of resilience capacities allow detailed analysis into the two types of social capital, bonding and bridging (Putnam, 2000), work together to build resilience. Bonding social capital promotes cohesion, solidarity, and civic action (Mathbor, 2007). Bridging capital involves heterogenous actors connecting across different networks to gain resources and achieve objectives (Consoer & Milman, 2015). For example, disaster planners and coordinators are traditionally responsible for transfers of human and material resources. However, the case of the NYCPN demonstrates how citizens work to provide resources to one another when government entities are unable to do so.

## **Method**

This study explores the mission and activities of the NYCPN according to Faulkner, Brown, and Quinn's (2018) framework of capacities for community resilience (place attachment; leadership; community networks; community cohesion and efficacy; and knowledge and learning). In keeping with disaster's assigned meaning within prepping subculture (Webb, 2018), disaster is defined broadly to reflect the wide range of scenarios referred to within the prepping community as disasters, such as natural disasters, pandemics, terrorist attacks, nuclear and technological disasters, and the collapse of the global economy and national governments.

This analysis draws on my ethnographic study of New York preppers (2017-2020) that involved participant-observation, semi-structured interviewing, and archival research. My participant-observation focused on attending the meetings of the NYCPN as a member and academic researcher. The NYCPN is a group of urban preppers that studies and practices preparedness strategies together. Based on data obtained from the Meetup membership profiles, the NYCPN has 496 members, with the majority of members being people of color.<sup>1</sup> By gender, the group is divided somewhat evenly between men (56%) and women (39%).<sup>2</sup> Member location by borough could not be determined.<sup>3</sup> My fieldwork allowed me to learn from immersion. As an NYCPN member, I attended meetings, workshops and weekend excursions in the woods. Independently, I completed select classes and activities to familiarize myself with prepping skills. In my fieldwork, I sought to strike the balance between an engaged group member (an insider) and an objective outsider (Gill & Temple, 2014). During the pandemic, additional data for this project was collected through attending virtual meetings, conducting virtual or phone in-depth interviewing and online archival research.



I conducted 40 semi-structured interviews with NYCPN's leaders and active members.<sup>4</sup> The purpose of a semi-structured interview is to explore designated topics by collecting similar types of information from each participant (Holloway & Wheeler 2010). Interview questions were designed to address the following broad categories: participation in NYCPN meetings and events, approaches to surviving the pandemic (such as sheltering-in-place or leaving the city, the use of community networks for exchanging information and providing assistance, and preparations or adjustments for continuing to endure the pandemic. In contrast to conducting a large survey on social capital and community resilience, this qualitative approach allows for a more detailed and holistic account of the role of social capital in the NYCPN's disaster preparedness efforts within the localized setting of New York (See Kerr, 2018). Through my analysis of my fieldwork and the semi-structured interviews, common themes and narratives emerged that revealed the importance of bonding and bridging social capital within the NYCPN subculture. My personal experiences with different New York crises including sheltering in place for over 100 days during the pandemic, Hurricane Sandy, the Northeastern Blackout as well as three terrorist attacks, also allowed me to share empathy with participants.

Archival research involved collecting three categories of documents: 1) reports on the disasters in New York, including COVID-19's effect on poor and immigrant communities; 2) media coverage of New York preppers and prepping strategies; 3) New York preppers' social media posts about practicing prepping. The first category consists of policy documents and televised presentations by government officials and agencies (federal, state, local), reports published by nonprofits such as community advocacy and public health organizations, press coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic's effect on its effect on poor and immigrant communities and historical records of past epidemics in New York. Media coverage of New York preppers

and prepping strategies during the pandemic include print, digital services, podcasts and television. New York prepper social media posts refers to public communication such as group Facebook pages, Instagram feeds, and Twitter messages.

## **Findings**

### *Place Attachment*

Founded in 2010, the New York City Prepper's Network (NYCPN) is a group of city dwellers interested in learning and sharing knowledge about prepping. According to the NYCPN's Meetup page, "The primary goal of the NYC Prepper's Network is to create a community network of like-minded individuals who share their knowledge of all things related to self-sufficiency. . .to establish a network of folks to share ideas with, learn from and eventually hope to trust should the need arise" ("New York City Prepper's Network", 2019). This mission statement reflects the NYCPN's core principles: learning from one another, demonstrating commitment by attending events and training, and planning to rely on one another if needed during a disaster. According to Tuan (1975, p. 156), cities are "central to meaning". What meaning does New York have for these urban preppers in relation to planning for disaster? Place attachment is a dominant theme in the NYCPN's mission and conceptualization of prepping in three ways. First, for NCYPN members, New York's recent disaster history requires that one should know how to prepare for survival. Second, New York's position as the first epicenter of the pandemic in the context of the federal government's ambiguous plan for combatting the virus also worked to reinforce the group's philosophy of preparedness and self-reliance. Third, the confines of city life (a dense population living in smaller dwellings) requires urban preppers to make adaptations to their survival strategies.

With the start of the 21st century, New York has experienced disasters (or threats of disasters) that are of primary concern to urban preppers: terrorist attacks, technological failures, natural disasters, government or economic collapse, and pandemics. These direct experiences with disaster have driven interest in urban prepping. While the World Trade Center Attack (2001) is well-known, Manhattan also experienced four other terrorist attacks: Failed Car Bombing of Times Square (2010); Chelsea Bomb Explosion (2016); Truck Driven into People on West Side Bike Path (2017) and the Times Square-Port Authority Subway Bomb Partial-Detonation (2017). New York was battered by Hurricane Sandy (2012), the worst storm in the city's history. The Northeastern Blackout (2003) also left New Yorkers without electricity for nearly two days, including thousands who were without mass transit. The Great Recession (2008) also negatively affected the city's economy. Also, as an international gateway, New York has always been in danger the possible outbreak of pandemics or epidemics. While the city did not have significant outbreaks of Zika (2016) or Ebola (2014), New York endured an outbreak of the H1N1 influenza (the Swine Flu) in 2009.

For New York, as the first epicenter of COVID-19, and for the United States, the devastating impact of COVID-19 across all areas of life (health, economic, and social) increased due to the federal government's failure to launch a comprehensive plan to battle COVID-19). Serious policy mistakes can be traced throughout the chronology of the virus's spread including President Trump's decision to downplay early warnings about the virus, the government's failure to coordinate a national supply-chain for protective equipment and medical supplies, and the shifting policies on the wearing of facemasks (Shear et al., 2020). For New York preppers, the breakdown in governmental response at the federal level confirmed their belief in self-reliance. The pandemic has had a more significant impact on the city than the 9/11 terrorist attack, the

Great Recession, or Hurricane Sandy (Partnership for New York City, 2020). As President Trump continued to deny the effects of the pandemic, a weary city turned its eyes toward Governor Andrew Cuomo of New York State. Under Cuomo's direction, the New York State government and New York City government carried out a coordinated plan that worked to address critical healthcare challenges such as bed shortages, overwhelmed hospital staff, and a shortage of personal protective equipment for hospital workers. Still, battles between states for vital medical equipment like ventilators and essentials like N95 masks confirmed urban preppers' fears that the government would be unable to provide sufficient resources in times of crisis.

For many NYCPN members, their identities as New Yorkers and attachment to their city were sources of strength and resilience in coping with living in the country's first epicenter of the virus. Place attachment encouraged many NYCPN members to shelter in place rather than leave. As Jason stated, "I stayed because I'm a New Yorker. Sure, I get sick of the city sometimes but it's my home. Some New Yorkers I know, they are real New Yorkers. They aren't going anywhere no matter what. There's only one New York. They are right about that." Other NYCPN members also shared that their attachment to New York helped ground them when encountering negative responses about New York's need for aid during the height of the pandemic. Greg, a four-year NYCPN member explained:

"Reading Facebook comments like 'New York can die' or 'Let those liberal New Yorkers infect each other' just disgusted me. New York's always rescuing other parts of the country. Every time there's a hurricane, we bail out some poor southern state. Still, they voted no on helping us after Hurricane Sandy. Remember, it took Jon Stewart to shame the country into helping 9/11 first-responders. New York preppers know that we

can't depend on the feds or the states. Now, everyone else is starting to figure that out. I'm proud to be a New Yorker. New York's culture and money drive this country. We don't need them."

The group's Meetup page also identifies the unique challenges of urban prepping: "NYC Preppers Network is an Emergency Preparedness & Wilderness group for city dwellers that are concerned with preparing for disasters. Some of us don't live in a home, have garages, wells, basements or attics to store our survival gear in. Most of us live in apartments. City occupants face a different set of challenges. Space, Food Storage, Water, Security, Sanitation, Evacuation Routes & many other issues are of a great concern for city dwellers" ("New York City Prepper's Network", 2019). In describing the challenges of prepping in New York, which include limited space for storing supplies and few evacuation routes, the group also connects to the emotional, intellectual, and physical relationships to place. High population density, traffic congestion and smaller dwellings are all challenges of New York life that make prepping even more difficult. For urban preppers, the two main approaches to surviving disaster are sheltering in place ("bugging in") and leaving the city to reach a safe haven ("bugging out"). In these two approaches, the social and physical dimensions of place attachments can work to promote or weaken resilience.

Staying in your home during a disaster is known as "sheltering in place." As described by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) (2019), "There may be situations, depending on your circumstances and the nature of the disaster, when it's simply best to stay where you are and avoid any uncertainty outside by 'sheltering in place.'" To store food and supplies, many NYC preppers have dedicated spaces such as closets, cabinets or designated areas in their apartments that contain emergency supplies to help their families survive in dire circumstances. Such a

storage area is referred to as “prepper closet.” A prepper closet contains essential items such as medical supplies, protective equipment, non-perishable food, large containers of water, flashlights and batteries. In addition, prepper closets also contain special items for family members such as treats or toys for children. At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, urban preppers were already prepared to shelter in place with their prepper closets stocked with provisions required during a pandemic such as masks, gloves, and hand sanitizer. As the pandemic wore on, the NYCPN held virtual meetings to exchange ideas and tips for making sheltering in place in the city easier for its members. Topics related to place attachment included discussing New York as the epicenter of the pandemic and frustrations over the lack of concern in other parts of the country, encouraging preppers to stay the course and make adjustments for quarantining in small spaces (such as adhering to a schedule and designating work and study spaces), identifying areas of Manhattan that were perceived to be less safe, and identifying local stores that carried needed supplies and seemed to restock quickly.

Bugging out refers to leaving an area to escape disaster. In planning for bugging out of the city, the city’s physical characteristics (such its geography, travel routes, and exit points) are foregrounded over its social dimensions. When using this strategy, New York preppers plan to leave the city for safe havens, which can include the home of a family member or friend, a second home, or a hidden campsite in the tri-state area. New York preppers would rely on their own bug out bags for food and supplies until they reach their safe destination. Given traffic congestion and the limited number of exit routes, leaving the city by car or bus may prove difficult. With advance warning, some NYCPN members plan to drive or fly out of the city. For example, some NYCPN members elected to leave the city in response to early warnings about the high risks of COVID-19 to city residents.

## *Leadership*

The NYCPN's leader, Jason Charles, has guided the group's mission and activities since 2012. Charles has served in the New York Fire Department for nearly twenty years and he has been a prepper for ten. His dedication to teaching preparedness stems from his survivalist training and from his experience as a first responder. During his tenure, the group's focus has shifted from holding meetings to practicing survival skills during organized outdoor excursions. As a leader, Charles' interest in advancing the group's skill set would not have been accomplished without the engagement and support of his followers (NYCPN members) (Grint, 2005).

Under Charles, co-organizers and assistant organizers help lead the NYCPN. While Charles is the primary leader, the co-organizers assist him in managing the group's agenda and activities. Co-organizers are selected based on their seniority in the group, commitment to participation, and their respective skills sets. Appointment as a co-organizer is a special recognition of achievement for demonstrating mastery of prepping skills, and is a serious commitment to the group. Based on their years of membership, co-organizers are highly skilled in all areas determined by the group to be valuable in prepping such as bushcraft (wilderness survival skills) and first aid. Their role is broad and includes teaching and administrative tasks such as designing and leading workshops, planning events, screening membership and scouting locations for excursions. For example, during the pandemic, Inshirah, a co-organizer who specializes in homesteading, offered instruction on canning and food dehydration to ensure that members had access to fresh vegetables and fruits in the event of food shortages. In speaking about the group's importance to her during the pandemic, Inshirah stated, "The group has helped me have a sense of appreciation for people who think ahead. During the pandemic, I had a few

moments of wondering how I would do if things get much worse. Having people to rely on is crucial.”

As Curphy et al. (1999, p.1) notes, “leadership is a process not a position”. All NYCPN members take a role in influencing the group toward accomplishing its goal. Charles, as the NYCPN’s designated leader, directs and coordinates the group’s efforts to learn prepping skills and to develop a network of support during disaster. Based on seniority and expertise, co-organizers and other members facilitate learning by teaching and serving as information resources. Lastly, all group members, as dedicated preppers, aim to act as leaders when seeking to protect their families and neighbors during disasters.

### *Knowledge and Learning*

Gaining knowledge and skills is the primary focus of the NYCPN. To facilitate learning disaster preparedness, NYCPN engages in activities ranging from lectures to weekend excursions at various skill levels. Members are expected to demonstrate a deep commitment to prepping through active participation, and developing advanced bushcraft (wilderness survival) skills and sheltering in place capabilities. During its ten-year history, the NYCPN has held over 100 meetings. Meeting types include general meetings and topic discussions, lectures and workshops where members learn a new skill, attending events not sponsored by the group but related to prepping, and excursions, which include two-day retreats and overnight outings to practice skills. The group’s agenda has advanced from exploring introductory topics to focusing on practicing prepping skills in outdoor settings. For the first three years (2010-2012), the group’s activities centered on developing basic prepping and homesteading knowledge such as learning the purpose and contents of a bug out bag and an introduction to canning through lectures, workshops and events. Starting in 2013, the group’s agenda expanded to include excursions like



challenging “bug out” trips and hands-on workshops on more advanced homesteading skills like canning or making toiletries. From 2014 through 2019, overnight excursions to practice skills and to develop endurance were the group’s top activity. In 2020, the NYCPN held mainly virtual meetings that addressed issues related to coping with COVID-19 such as improving prepper closets, making hand sanitizer, and open discussions about how to resolve the challenges of sheltering in place. Through these events, NYCPN members learn different types and forms of knowledge that allow them to respond and adapt to change (MacLean et al, 2013). As one NYCPN member of three years observed, “Training with the group was crucial to my knowing how to deal with the pandemic. Our trips have toughened me up a bit. I wasn’t anxious. I was steady and trying to figure the best plan for my family. Being part of the NYCPN, I had protective gear and my stores. We learned how to sheltering in place. The real lesson for me, what I learned from the group, was breaking down my plan into components that made sense for a pandemic, making adjustments for the long haul not just a few days and making sure we had some flexibility. Feeling confident about my choices.”

### *Community Cohesion*

The NYCPN benefits from strong community cohesion. Central to community cohesion are agency and self-efficacy—key attributes that enable communities to plan, manage, and adapt to disaster (Brown & Westwood, 2011). Agency is the capacity of a group to engage independently in collective action to define its own resilience. Self-efficacy is the community’s collective belief in its capacity to perform behaviors necessary to meet their objective. In other words, community cohesion hinges on the independence and will of the group. Through their training and real-life application of prepping skills during COVID-19, the members of the NYCPN have demonstrated their collective ability to withstand disaster. Their commitment to

self-reliance and their belief in their prepping skills has empowered them to protect their families and neighbors during a crisis. Their resilience is founded on their commitment to and trust in one another.

In studying emergent response groups, Majchrak, Jarvenpaa, and Hollingshead (2007, p. 159) found that in dangerous settings, trust stems from “purposive action that conveys investment and vulnerability”. In the emotional and physical strain of disasters, trust is dynamic and continuously reaffirmed through action. Trust as a dynamic and continuous force (See Adler, 2001) is a core value of the NYCPN because it is a central component of preparedness. Trustworthiness is first measured by a group member’s dedication to learning survival skills by participating in NYCPN activities. During challenging outdoor excursions, NYCPN members bond with one another through overcoming hardships as the group works as a team to survive by completing tasks such as fire making, shelter building, or finding a water source.

Prior to the pandemic, a “bug out bag” symbolizes one’s level of trustworthiness and competence level in a survival situation. Typically weighing around twenty pounds, a bug out bag is a pre-packed bag with emergency essentials for at least a five-day period (Charles, 2014). A bug out bag contains crucial provisions such as water, food, first aid, shelter, clothing, fire, tools and reference documents (See [www.ready.gov/build-a-kit](http://www.ready.gov/build-a-kit) for a supply list). Beyond must-have items, many supplies are selected according to personal preference. NYCPN members, create their own bags by carefully selecting and testing their own provisions to ensure optimal quality and durability. On excursions, members rely on the contents of their respective bug out bags for survival. Therefore, a member’s knowledge of and familiarity with his or her tools is an important indicator of one’s commitment to prepping.

As the pandemic has continued, one's prepper closet has now become an important symbol of trustworthiness. The careful stocking and maintenance of provisions is a complex process offers great insight into one's knowledge about sheltering in place. Group members already had protective equipment and food stored for potential use. Therefore, members frequently discussed their provisions and compared notes about factors such as quality, shelf life, and cost. Furthermore, NYCPN members also exchanged information about strategies for extending the shelf life of food items, expanding the number of servings of freeze-dried provisions, and creative storage options for small apartments (such utilizing storage underneath beds or on bookcases). These discussions strengthen the knowledge base of and the bond between group members.

The creation of a satisfactory bug out bag and prepper's closet are important achievements for NYCPN members. Rather than merely being items, the bug out bag and the prepper closet each represent a survival approach that can be carried out through the use of knowledge and tools. The NYCPN provides strong bonding capital because these two survival approaches improve the resiliency of NYCPN members. Through their participation in the NYCPN, members have gained valuable resources to protect their families against disaster without relying on government aid or action. This level of resilience is crucial for vulnerable and marginalized people who have experienced inequities in the distribution of aid during disaster, not only because they usually live in neighborhoods that are more exposed but also because they lack the resources needed for coping with the aftermath (Wisner et al, 2003) which negatively impacts recovery outcomes (Phillips and Fordham, 2009).

### *Community Networks*

Through its events and the existing connections of group members, the NYCPN also relies on fostering links to diverse networks to strengthen its resilience. As a group, the NYCPN establishes connections with experts in preparedness and organizations that teach survival skills. The NYCPN invites guest speakers to share their insights at meetings, and group leaders supply information about organizations and resources. NYCPN members also attend training or events and report back to the group about their respective experiences. This ongoing exchange of information and resources (such as innovations in prepping skills or equipment) strengthens group resilience and their sense of community.

Although preppers are sometimes stereotyped by the media as paranoids and isolationists, NYCPN members have strong social networks and many belong to civic organizations. Work-based networks are also critical, as some NYCPN members are employed in the emergency services, healthcare, and public services. Through these networks, the NYCPN is able to receive and exchange timely and valuable information regarding disasters. By participating in civic organizations and other volunteer groups, NYCPN members utilized social networks as information and resource links throughout the pandemic.

In late January 2020, as concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic began to grow, many NYCPN members started contacting one another to exchange ideas about the potential threat of the pandemic and to discuss their respective approaches to sheltering in place. In the weeks before the pandemic, many urban preppers, secure in their own preparations, began to teach their neighbors and friends how to shelter in place. By replying to texts, answering phone calls and coaching people on purchases, NYCPN members were working as trusted advisors in preparing for disaster. As one urban prepper observed, “For years, no one wanted to talk with me about

prepping. I was a crazy person. Now, everyone is calling me for advice. That's fine. I'm happy to help. At last."

During the COVID-19 pandemic, NYCPN members benefited from the mutual assistance offered by mobilizing these networks. Information was exchanged regarding breaking news about government policies on protecting against the virus and advice from city healthcare workers. For example, some NYCPN members are first responders who provided updates on neighborhoods hit especially hard by the pandemic, overcrowded hospitals or areas with increasing crime rates. Interstate and intrastate resource networks that allowed for the distribution of needed supplies also emerged. Through these networks, calls were made for supplies so that others could try to locate the items, supplies were either exchanged between members or offered for free or sold for face value. In one network of restaurant suppliers and friends, NYCPN members were kept abreast of availability of sought-after food items such as yeast and flour. Within another network, one New York prepper opened up her large cache of provisions to non-preppers in need. Similar to Consoer and Milman's (2016) study of the role of social capital of recovery groups in Vermont after Tropical Storm Irene, the NYCPN's successful web of community networks illustrates that strong initial bonding social capital generated increased bonding capital and attracted more bridging social capital, which allowed access to more available resources.

## **Conclusion**

As an example of community resilience, the NYCPN demonstrates how human interaction, resources, and social capital can bolster a group's success in contending with disaster (Chaskin, 2008). Exploring the mission and activities of the NYCPN according to Faulkner et al's (2018) framework of five capacities for community resilience, revealed the importance of

each element and their interconnections in shaping the resilience of a community. For these urban preppers, place attachment served as a foundation for building their group's agenda and their respective survival plans. Analyzing the social and physical dimensions of New York as a place for survival or a place to escape from was central to all levels of preparedness. The NYCPN's goals of teaching and practicing survival skills on excursions required leadership in many forms. While the group's primary leader served as both a spokesperson and educator, as an individual, he could not complete all management tasks without the support of dedicated members. These members served as instructors at events, acted as information resources on specialty subjects, and oversaw activities in the primary leader's absence. Given the NYCPN's mission to acquire preparedness skills, knowledge and learning were core principals of the group. Community cohesion was reinforced throughout preparedness training as group members learned to develop their individual skills and to rely on one another. The creation of a bug out bag and a prepper's closet are two valuable resources for resiliency gained by participating in the group. The NYCPN's diverse networks also enabled members to assist one another as well as non-group members. Bonding social capital and bridging social capital were key elements in all five capacities.

The NYCPN's mission and activities demonstrate possible ways to engage in the work of community resilience. In the context of the lack of a clear federal plan to combat the virus, the NYCPN sought to improve community resilience by working to reduce resource inequities, developing networks to support preppers and others, and educate New Yorkers about preparedness. An important direction for future research on community resilience would be to study the impact of local groups in teaching disaster preparedness that then transition to providing support during crisis rather than focusing on local emergent groups involved in

disaster recovery. This research also points to the need to develop disaster management approaches that can expand the traditional “command and control” models to incorporating community-based involvement in disaster preparedness (LaLone, 2012). Making space for local knowledge and resources only works to increase community resilience. By adopting this approach, disaster management professionals can build on and build up a community’s existing strengths.

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<sup>1</sup> For Meetup profiles, the NYCPN now requires member photos (head shot). A content analysis indicates: 39.3% people of color, 37.7% white and 28% unknown (no photo listed). During my field research (2017-2020), the majority of attendees at all events were people of color.

<sup>2</sup> Membership profile information on gender was unavailable for 5% of members.

<sup>3</sup> On membership profiles, nearly 70% of members did not identify their borough and listed only “New York.”

<sup>4</sup> With the exception of the group leader, Jason Charles, group members requested to be referred by first name only or by a fictitious name.

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