

# SENSEMAKING

## UNSOLVED CRIMES: THE AIR CONDITIONERS DID IT!

Paul Abels, Ph.D., California State University, Long Beach

On the face of it, France and Chicago wouldn't seem to have much in common. Yet while they don't speak the same language, they have had similar problems, and in one situation, problems which many would consider criminal. In France approximately 15,000 people died in a heat wave this past August. In Chicago, 700 people died in a heat wave in 1995. In both cases most of those who died were aged, and in many cases persons living alone, or left alone.

In both cases blame was directed in many directions. Some blamed the politicians, some blamed the electric companies, some blamed the victims, and in France, some even blamed the air-conditioners, or the lack of them (Tagliabue, 2003). Closer analysis however reveals more sinister causes: simply, the isolation of, and lack of concern for the aged and their lack of resources and of social capital.

Robert Putnam (2000), in his book *Bowling Alone*, made a strong case for the decline in our society of Social Capital that he sees as social connections related to mutual values: trust and reciprocity. The consequences of this deterioration have dire consequences for persons' well being and for a civil society. His book includes a massive collection of research showing the importance of social capital for health, stress, and as we will see in the Chicago and France heat waves, life and death.

### Dying Alone

In France, the fact that the heat wave occurred in August, a time of mass migration by the French to vacation spots through out the world, meant that fewer medical and health services were available to serve those in need. Many families left their elderly relatives at

home alone. After a steady period of 104 degree temperatures many, particularly the elderly, became ill and unable to care for themselves, with few connections to call on for help; and those in understaffed nursing homes died. Retirement home officials said that they were understaffed and accused the government of slashing their budgets (Associated Press, 2003).

One family postponed the funeral of a parent, because they didn't want to miss their August 15<sup>th</sup> holiday (Tagliabue). What social services were available to serve these persons, and what went wrong? We do know that, like their compatriots, there was a large exodus of doctors on August holidays. We will have to wait for the official report from the French government.

However, in the Chicago heat wave, we have a more complete picture of the causes, the consequences, and some clues on the extent of social work participation. In Eric Klineneberg's book, *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago* (2002), he discusses, studies, and compares the community in which the highest proportion of elderly deaths occurred, with an adjacent community with many fewer elderly deaths. His data is revealing and depressing, and makes a case against isolation, illustrating the importance of connections and social capital.

He briefly compares two adjacent communities with a large proportion of minorities, one an African-American Community, North Lawndale (NL) 96% black, the other a Latino community South Lawndale (SL) 85% Latino. A few brief statistics will illustrate the large difference in the death rate of both areas. There were 19 heat-related deaths in NL, a rate of 40/100,000. There were 3 heat related deaths in SL, a rate of 4/100,000. The total

deaths in Chicago were 521, a rate 7/100,000. (Klinenberg, p. 87).

As in France, the deaths were blamed on the Mayor, the electric companies, the lack of fans in many homes, and among other things, budget slashing. Many of the dead were found in rooms with the windows closed. Some in Chicago would not use the fans because they were concerned about the cost of electricity. Often the poor-elderly turned off their TVs to save money and were not aware of the "cooling centers" that had been opened throughout the city. This led to statements like those of the Chicago Human Services Commissioner: "We're talking about people who die because they neglect themselves... we did everything possible but some people don't even want to open their door to us." (Klinenberg, p.172). There were differences, officials noted: those seniors who were "hooked into the department of aging, the AARP, the senior clubs, the churches, they are part of that word of mouth network and they hear... such active seniors are also the people most likely to go to cooling centers on hot summer days or to call friends or local organizations to request support" (Klinenberg, p. 159). That is just one example of the importance of social capital. Those who were connected to organizations had more chances to survive.

Yet a major question remains: why were the death rates so different in the two communities? Both were almost entirely minority communities. Klinenberg suggests something like this.

The African-American community had a high proportion of empty stores, deteriorating and vacant housing, higher crime rates, elderly who feared leaving their homes because of crime, a lack of stores to shop, and was a community that was less connected with each other and was experiencing a continuing loss of population. It was a historically older community but in decline. Vacant houses and vacant land made connections with oth-

ers difficult. The population in 1960 was 124,000. The population in 1990 was 47,000,

The Latino community, on the other hand, was a growing community with an influx of new residents, with many shops and persons less fearful of going out into the streets. Shops and market areas were crowded during the day and there were stores that were air-conditioned, which many of the elderly used during the heat wave. The population in 1960 was 60,000, the population in 1990, was 81,000.

But the reasons why there were differences in both minority communities have deeper roots. Klinenberg noted comments by Chicago leaders, "North Lawndale became a 'wasteland', while Little Village (SL) evolved into a 'beehive of commercial activity' because of 'the degree of segregation' in North Lawndale." South Lawndale did not "experience the particular constraints of ghettoization" that some other African-American communities had suffered from over many years in Chicago." (Klinenberg, p. 115)

The complexities which had consequences for the heat wave tragedy were staggering, and I can only suggest you read the book

### Where We Weren't

Surely at a time of such need, social workers would show up, perhaps late, but we would be there. There were organizations active in trying to arrange safe places for people, demanding better service and perhaps doing some counseling of the families who suffered from the tragedy, but what else? How visible were the welfare organizations?

We all know that services are underfunded, that the poor and elderly often live in isolated areas and in public housing or single room hotels, that they are marginalized, even in the best of times. But let us consider that many live in areas where "social workers and case managers for the elderly were generally about making home visits to black residents of Chicago's most disreputable areas."

(Klinenberg, p. 156). But read on: "Some of the case workers I got to know, including many African-Americans, disliked working in these "no-go" areas because they believed that the risks to their personal safety were too high." (p. 156) The author continues: "Every agency I visited had adopted an informal and unwritten policy of making rounds in predominantly African-American housing projects, very poor black neighborhoods before noon, and some workers tried to avoid them after 10:00 A.M." (p. 157). Well, perhaps the less said the better. Except to note that this seemed to be the way the elderly in those communities also lived, with a fear to be out on the street at the wrong time.

Could social work have structured its services in a way that would have served the communities they feared? Could a temporary office in trailer been set up on one of those empty lots? Could social workers have made visits along with police to those living alone? Could they have ongoing lists of those living alone, and check with people by phone, if not in person? There was a need for connections with clients, with the police, with community leaders; all of these are social capital for workers and for clients. Social work has always been concerned with the importance of connections and its close links to mutual aid. We have stressed the importance of self-help and support groups. We have not dealt with how these connections can be linked to the external resources and mutual aid, crossing the boundaries to the external power. All workers and clients need the connections that will help them accomplish their goals. Workers can help persons develop needed connections.

Looking at France again, there were no external connections for the aged parents when the family left them to go on vacation. There were few connections external to the nursing homes that could aid when their staff left on vacation. "Many fragile people died alone in their homes." (Associated Press, 2003 p. 1).

One might also assume many government officials were also on vacation and connections were thin there as well.

I am not familiar with group work resources in France, or of their social service system. We are not even sure what class differences might have existed that impacted the results.

What we know is that it was not the heat wave that created the problems. In both situations it was the social context, a lack of concern and services for the poor, the elderly, and the isolated, or, perhaps at worst, a lack of caring. Until we can overcome those problems, there will always be heat waves, and snowstorms, and floods, and hurricanes and other metaphors we can use to cover the real problems.

I wish it made sense to me!

## References

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