The systematic research of disasters as a social phenomenon has a nearly 100-year history. Students of disaster study these events both to understand the social dynamics of disaster and to use disasters as a way to understand broader social, political, and economic phenomena. Yet, despite nearly a century of research—a great deal of which was funded by the U.S. government—government officials, business managers, reporters, and the public appear unaware of this research. In particular, despite years of research that shows that disasters are not generally accompanied by widespread social collapse, these myths continue to suffuse media reports and influence managerial and policy decisions. In this lecture I will review this research, grounded largely in sociology and geography—and show how the research field has grown to include a wide range of disciplines. I will review what we know, and what a range of disciplines can contribute to better understanding disasters, both to illuminate the workings of societies and to mitigate the very real costs of these events to people and their communities.

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