


# The Impact of Teen Community Emergency Response Team Training

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## ABSTRACT

A study of 481 high school students who completed Teen Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) training using the Federal Emergency Management Agency CERT curriculum was conducted over a five-year period, with the objective of identifying the impacts of that training. Through both quantitative and qualitative data collection, the researcher found that a highly engaging emergency response curriculum has multiple positive impacts on teens completing the course. Those impacts include explicit knowledge and skills of emergency preparedness and response, college and career goal orientation enhancement, as well as enhancement to self-efficacy, self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-concept. Replicating such curricula and comprehensive training program at other secondary schools could have a very positive impact on the emergency preparedness and response capacity of communities where it is implemented.

## KEYWORDS

Campus Emergency Response Team, Community Emergency Response Team, Federal Emergency Management Agency, Goal Orientation, Self-Concept, Self-Confidence, Self-Efficacy, Self-Esteem, Teen CERT

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The purpose of this study was to determine the impact that a school-based Teen Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) training program using the Federal Emergency Management Agency curriculum has on the young people it trains. The Los Angeles City Fire Department conceived of a community-based team response program which they named CERT and first conducted in 1986, partially in response to an earthquakes in Mexico City and Japan in 1985 that resulted in significant loss of life, injury, and damage to structures and infrastructure, including many heroic stories of volunteers saving the lives of neighbors, at the same time many volunteers were killed when trying to help save peers (primarily because they lacked training).

The Southern California Whittier Narrows earthquake in 1987 reinforced the need for local community members to be able to respond to significant emergencies and natural disasters when professional emergency responders are stretched too thin to meet the varying needs of a community with widespread significant emergency/disaster impacts. Many people in the Los Angeles area were stunned at the perceived unresponsiveness of professionally trained rescuers and medical personnel, and this served as a wakeup call that when a large-scale emergency or disaster occurs, individuals,

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families, businesses, schools, and neighborhoods need to be prepared to conduct disaster emergency operations without support from professional rescuers and emergency medical providers.

As a result, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) adopted the CERT model nationwide in 1993, and the program has since expanded to all 50 states and most tribal nations and territories across the nation. Similar programs have become commonplace in more than 80 countries worldwide. FEMA reports there are now more than 2,700 localized CERT programs and that nearly three quarters of a million people in the United States have received CERT training.

FEMA has published a formal curriculum it recommends local agencies use in delivering the CERT content. That curriculum includes instruction in general disaster preparedness for individuals and families, the CERT organizational structure and emergency/disaster incident management, disaster medical response operations, disaster psychology, fire safety and suppression and utility controls, light search and rescue operations, and terrorism. The curriculum also includes a variety of hands-on skills experiences and assessments in addition to a written test on which a 75% minimum score is required to receive a completion certificate.

The current study involved students at a comprehensive California public high school. At that school, all students in grade 9 take the CERT course as part of a required elective course. At the school, students who have completed CERT training also utilize their CERT skills to serve on both school and community-based emergency response teams in full scale drills and exercises, tabletop exercises, and various community emergency preparedness events. They also participate in local and regional CERT team competitions wherein they practice and demonstrate proficiency at CERT skills in performance-based assessments against other CERT teams.

During school years 2014-2015, 2015-2016, 2016-2017, 2017-2018, and 2018-2019, the students who successfully completed the course and at least one year of experience as certified CERT members were administered a survey asking them to rate their perceptions in three broad areas and thereby answer these research questions: 1) To what extent did the Teen CERT program help students perceive that they mastered essential knowledge and skills in emergency response?; 2) To what extent did the Teen CERT program impact students' college and career aspirations?; and 3) To what extent did the Teen CERT training impact student dispositions and perceptions of themselves? The present study summarizes results from that survey. It is important because replicating such curricula and comprehensive training program at other secondary schools could have a very positive impact on the emergency preparedness and response capacity of communities where it is implemented.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

There is a definite dearth of current research on Community Emergency Response Teams, and absolutely no research this researcher was able to find on teen CERT programs and their efficacy or impact. In research conducted prior to the advent of CERTs, Wenger in both 1989 and 1991 examined volunteer behavior in emergency and disaster management scenarios and found that while many volunteers were able to perform important support roles, the single biggest challenge was the lack of formal training in critical disaster support roles. His recommendations were largely fulfilled with the creation of the Los Angeles CERT curriculum which eventually became the basis of both American and international CERT programming.

Katie Scanlon, an intern at the International Institute of Global Resilience, published a working paper in 2015 which provided case studies of university campus CERT teams and the roles they played in various natural disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina. Through specifically examining Campus CERT Programs at Miami University, Auburn University, Georgetown University, and Wesleyan University. Scanlon explains the impact such programs can have in supporting university communities in emergency response situations. Benefits she reported included Campus CERT team members providing invaluable response in roles such as traffic management, evacuation support, information

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