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Sociology

## **The Eastland Disaster**

The Eastland Disaster occurred in Chicago, Illinois on July 24, 1915 in the Chicago River. Over 800 people died during this tragedy. My sociology class conducted a study regarding the awareness of the Eastland Disaster by age. The results are as follows: 59 years old and younger responded “Yes” 32% (n=128) and “No” 68% (n=271). For the 60 year old and older (elderly) responded “Yes” 46% (n=185) and “No” 54% (n=214). Both age groups combined responded “Yes” 39% (n=313) and “No” 61% (n=485). I randomly interviewed twenty people (ten younger and ten elderly adults) in the Chicago land area asking them if they have ever heard of the Eastland Disaster and only two out of the twenty people said yes. The first person to have heard of the disaster was a 73 year-old man and he said his father told him about it but didn't recall any exact events. The second person was a 65 year-old woman and she was told the story by her aunt but could not recall any exact events either. These two interviews did not help me gather any more information than I already had so I could imagine the trouble the people at the Eastland Organization must have trying to find people that could recall events coherently because it was such a long time ago.

The Eastland Organization believes the disaster occurred with many causes, rather than one. I agree with this statement because of the lack of information and artifacts we have today to make any exact conclusions to the cause. Only a few survivors are left and they are

elderly, I'm sure this is a major problem trying to gather coherent recollections. A second problem is the lack of media that was available in 1915. Televisions were not invented yet and most people received their worldly information from the radio and newspapers. For the people that could not afford a radio, they relied on oral relaying of information. Unfortunately, the Chicago newspapers did not effectively report on the Eastland Disaster as well as they should have because of World War I.

I believe the Eastland Disaster is a case of social amnesia. This tragedy was so devastating to Chicago because of the large amount of lives lost. Many people died together during an event planned by a company to provide fun and entertainment for the workers and families of the company. There were so many bodies and not enough places to put them that warehouses had to open their doors as temporary morgues for the families to identify their loved ones. I could just imagine how devastating this could be, families looking through hundreds of dead bodies and by looking for their loved one, they also identify friends from the company too. This was a very patriarchal time where the husband was the financial provider for the family and life insurance did not exist as it does today. Not only did the family mourn for their dead father, but finances were threatened as well.

The functionalist's perspective would predict that the reason why we don't know why more people don't know about the Eastland Disaster is due to the overshadowing effect of War World I and the Titanic tragedy. When I looked up newspapers from the week of July 24, 1915 in Chicago, I noticed every front-page headline was concerned about World War I. I looked through the newspaper and found articles regarding the relief effort as well as the volunteers that helped pull the bodies out of the water as well. The conflict perspective would predict why more people aren't aware of the Eastland Disaster is the division or separation of

social classes. The Titanic was a luxury ship transporting wealthy, prominent people from England and the Eastland was transporting blue-collar workers to a company picnic. The interactionist perspective would predict why so many people don't know about the Eastland Disaster is because it was too overwhelming emotionally. The fear of not knowing whether your family had perished and then to have to go through hundreds of dead bodies to find your loved one or loved ones had to be devastating. Secondly, I believe that people found it difficult to handle and just stopped talking about after the incident occurred just to start the healing process.

I agree with the Eastland Organization that there are many causes for the tragedy as well as many reasons why many people don't know about it. Through my research, I conclude that the lack of media available to people at this time was a definite reason. Today, we have the Internet, television, radio, and newspapers to keep us up to date with current events. Secondly, the issue of emotional distress it was on friends and families was devastating as well.

If had more time to research this phenomenon, I would find out where the temporary morgues were and pay a visit to them. I was able to visit one such site, Excalibur Nightclub in Chicago. During 1915, it was a warehouse and it opened their doors to serve as temporary morgue for the families to identify their loved ones. I spoke with one of the managers and he said the employees make references to the dead bodies and their spirits that still live in the walls today when strange acts happen without cause. They told me that sometimes a door will shut unknowingly and they claim the club is still haunted. If I had more time on this project, I would contact more people at Excalibur and interview them as well as other temporary

morgue owners to find out more information. Lastly, I would look for more artifacts, I'm sure many wallets as well as jewelry was stolen off the dead bodies.