



## Hazard Reduction & Recovery Center

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### **“The Dynamics of Risk Perception: How does Perceived Risk Respond to Risk Events?”**

**George O. Rogers**

There's less concern about near hazardous facilities by those who live near them than by people who live farther away. The study provides a survey that addresses the public perception of the risks linked with two types of technological facilities: hazardous waste and energy production. Independent samples represent households in Odessa, and La Porte, Texas. The paper focuses on the properties of risk perception while taking into account the risk events occurring in both of the communities where risk events would have the greatest impact.

### **Findings**

This paper analyzes the effect of risk events on how people understand risk and what that means for public policy in regard to technological risk. The study finds that risk events are interpreted through social processes which construct, reconstruct and maintain perceived risk through time. Events that become part of an ongoing pattern are more likely to lead to enhanced public concern. In Odessa, there no pattern for the hazard to fit into, but being ignited by lightning led the public to think of the event as an “act of God” rather than a “technological failure.” In La Porte, people are unable to intervene regularly in the generation of stack emissions, which happens on an on-going basis, and their only choice is to leave the “threatened area.”. Both the actual hazard and the psychological risk in an individual's mind are less important than the socially created risk.

### **Implications**

Resident understandings of hazardous facilities show both the impact of risk events and the effects when no risk occurs. The social processes that create and maintain risk in the public eye are as important as the physical and psychological dimensions of risk. The research focuses on the learning processes that characterize what risk events alter the risk perception by comparing the impact of intense and constant risk events. This study is the beginning of an important area of research that addresses changes in how citizens see risk, in connection with actual risk events in communities.