



15 February 2024

[Redacted]  
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Reference: OIA-2023/24-0435

Dear [Redacted]

**Official Information Act request relating to civil disasters.**

Thank you for your Official Information Act 1982 (the Act) request received on 19 January 2024. You requested:

*“There may not be an answer to my query but here goes...*

*As part of my job to share local history with our community I give talks on the 1931 Hawke’s Bay earthquake.*

*Many of the books on the subject say that to date at 256 deaths HB earthquake is New Zealand’s worst civil disaster.*

*My understanding is a civil disaster includes epidemics and transport accidents. What I am not sure is what if any are the criteria for an event to be deemed a civil disaster.*

*If we look at numbers of deceased than the 1918 influenza epidemic at 9000 and Erebus at 257 are more. Even covid has killed more people.*

*Does anyone at DPMC have an answer to this or is something that was once quoted and no longer used as a defining statement?”*

While there is no official definition of civil disaster, the National Disaster Resilience Strategy does have a definition of disaster. This is defined as “A serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society, at any scale, due to hazardous events interacting with conditions of exposure, vulnerability and capacity, leading to one or more of the following: human, material, social, cultural, economic and environmental losses and impacts”.

You can view this at: <https://www.civildefence.govt.nz/cdem-sector/plans-and-strategies/national-disaster-resilience-strategy>

In general, we refer to events in relation to the particular hazard involved. For instance, ‘the Hawkes Bay earthquake’, or ‘Cyclone Gabrielle’.

Generally other events, such as pandemic or disease outbreak, are referred to as what they are. For example, ‘the COVID pandemic’, and ‘Foot and mouth outbreak’. In cases such as these, the response would be a health or biosecurity emergency.

If we are considering disasters that originate from metrological or geological causes, then the Hawkes Bay earthquake, was the most costly in terms of lives lost. However as you note there have been disasters from other causes, for example, the 1918 Influenza pandemic, and the Mount Erebus crash, in which a greater number of people died.

You have the right to ask the Ombudsman to investigate and review my decision under section 28(3) of the Act.

This response will be published on the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet's website during our regular publication cycle. Typically, information is released monthly, or as otherwise determined. Your personal information including name and contact details will be removed for publication.

I hope this information helps address your query.

Yours sincerely



Anthony Richards  
**Chief Advisor to the Deputy Chief Executive Emergency Management**