Healthcare in the Path of Disaster:
Impacts of the 2011 Joplin Tornado on St John's Mercy Hospital

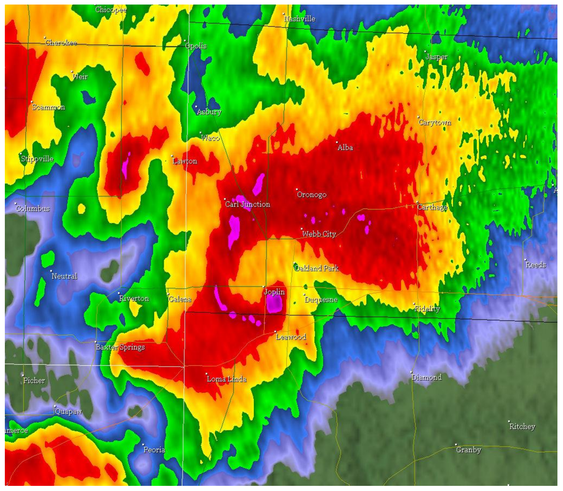
Bernadette Leyba, Chantel Nelson

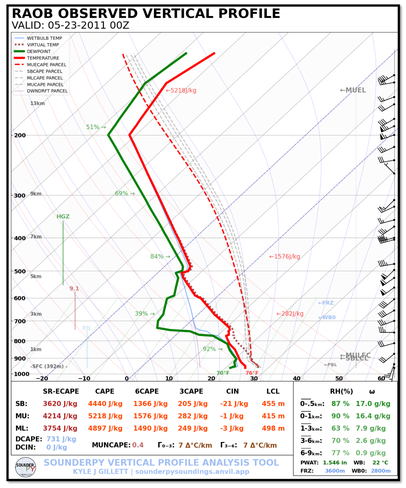
Introduction

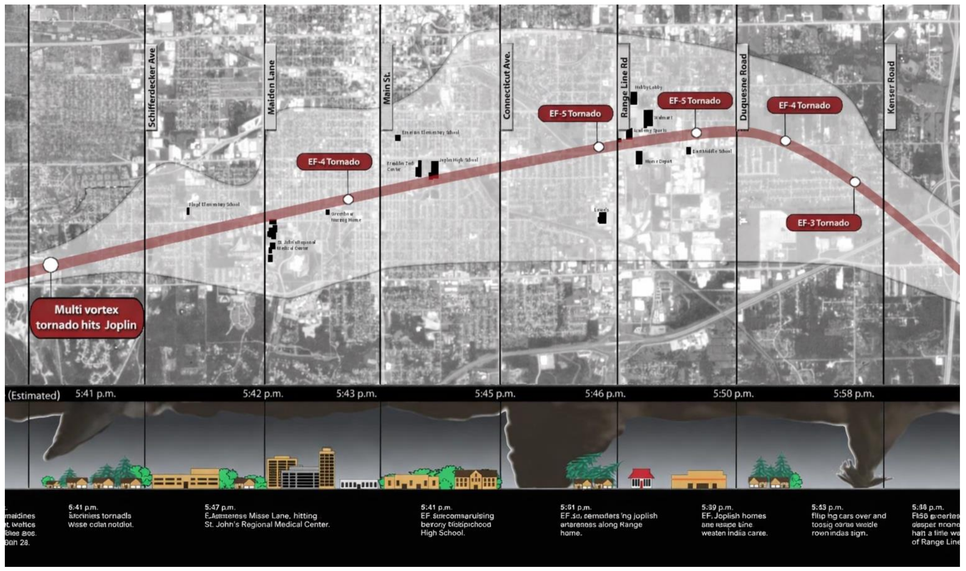
On May 22, 2011, an EF5 tornado struck Joplin, Missouri, killing 158 people and causing catastrophic damage across the city. The storm directly impacted St. Johns's Regional Medical Center, the region's primary hospital and trauma center, forcing a large-scale evacuation and disrupting medical response when emergency care was most needed. This study examines the meteorological setup and timeline of the Joplin tornado and investigates how the loss of critical hospital infrastructure affected rescue operations and patient care.

Meteorologic Setup and Storm Evolution

- Vertically stacked low over Northern Plains with secondary surface low over Kansas
- Triple point west of Joplin (warm, moist air mass 86°F/71°F)
- Low cloud base and strong instability (SBCAPE >4000 J kg^{-1})
- Low level wind shear (0-6 km > 40 kts)
- Storm mergers produced a dominant high precipitation supercell
- Rapid tornadogenesis outside of southwest Joplin with reduced visibility.
- Maximum width ~ 1 mile, track length ~ 22 miles
- Maximum winds > 200mph







Immediate Response

- Triage in hospital parking lot and surrounding parking lot
- Hospital patients and tornado victims evacuated to Freeman Hospital
- Tent hospital build within one week
- Portable facility built within six weeks

Reconstruction: Tornado Resilience

- Reinforced corridors and stairwells
- Impact resistant windows and storm rated doors
- Designated safe zones on every floor
- Mechanical and electrical infrastructure underground
- UPS back up on life support equipment
- Improved emergency patient tracking

Conclusion

- The Joplin EF5 tornado developed in a highly favorable severe weather event
- Its direct strike on the region's main hospital created a cascading emergency response failure
- The disaster revealed the importance of resilient hospital design in tornado prone regions
- Rebuilding efforts demonstrate how infrastructure improvements can reduce future disaster risk.

References

Tornado Impacts

- Densely populated area
- 158 deaths, injured >1000
- St John's Hospital and Trama Center
- >8,000 structures destroyed to include:
  - 2 fire stations
  - 8 school buildings
- Total property damage > $3 billion

Hospital Impacts

- All window and exterior doors blow out
- Roof torn off exposing interior
- Catastrophic structural and foundation damage
- Backup generators, water, and septic systems destroyed (6 deaths)
- Emergency evacuation during mass casualty event