

Disaster resilience: can the homeless afford it?

Dr Danielle Every and Dr Kirrilly Thompson, Central Queensland University Appleton Institute, consider the vulnerability of homeless people and suggest ways to support their resilience. 

ABSTRACT

Research in the US suggests that people experiencing homelessness are more at risk during natural disasters because they have limited access to the economic, social and community resources needed for preparation, evacuation and full recovery. Although this vulnerability is recognised in Australian disaster management documents, little is currently known about the unique vulnerabilities of people experiencing homelessness, nor about specific, targeted interventions that can increase their resilience to natural disasters. This paper provides a literature review of research into the vulnerability of homeless people. The review identifies important issues to consider when planning responses to disasters and highlights suggestions for how greater disaster resilience support can be offered. The review also outlines some gaps in knowledge about homelessness, vulnerability and resilience that may impede effective disaster management for this group.

'...afford to live in a home that was designed and built to resist disaster forces, to stockpile emergency supplies, and to save money for use during emergencies... [and have] the ability to pursue a wide range of options and to access multiple sources of aid following disasters.'

(Tierney 2006, p. 121)

Research by Wisner *et al.* (2004) demonstrates that disaster risk (death, injury, economic loss, psychological damage) is not random, but rather its distribution maps onto existing social inequalities. These include access to health care, political representation, and economic capital, as well as liveability (or existence) of a home and environment, and lower quality of life (Cutter, Boruff & Shirley 1990, Boon 2013). This complex relationship between resilience and vulnerability suggests that we cannot displace the responsibility for developing resilience onto people who are, by virtue of the social and economic inequalities that structure their lives, unable to access the necessary resources to do so. To build disaster resilience, these underlying social and economic inequities must be redressed.

A group who are particularly vulnerable to disasters, but have been less often considered in research and disaster risk interventions, are people experiencing homelessness. To help develop strategies to redress inequality in disaster risk, this paper reviews what is and is not known about the vulnerability of homeless people in disasters and suggests potential resilience-building strategies.

Disaster resilience and disaster vulnerability

In Australia disaster management has a focus on developing disaster resilience. This is articulated in the *National Strategy for Disaster Resilience* (COAG 2011) that defines resilience as the ability to function under stress, to adapt to change, to be self- (rather than government) reliant, and to have social capacity. However, this definition assumes that people have the social and economic resources to be self-reliant while adapting to change and recovering from unexpected and stressful events (Maguire & Cartwright 2008). In the context of disaster, Tierney (2006) indicates that resilience means people can:

Homelessness in Australia

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics *Census of Population and Housing: Estimating Homelessness 2011*, there are 105 237 people in Australia who are homeless (ABS 2011). The majority of these are under 35 years of age. There are 17 845 children under 12 who are homeless, including 400 children who sleep rough (AIHW 2012, Gibson & Johnstone 2010). Families account for 26 per cent of the homeless population in Australia, particularly women and children who have experienced domestic violence (AIHW 2012).

People experiencing homelessness are people who do not have a permanent home and who are:

- sleeping outdoors or in improvised dwellings (sleeping rough)
- sleeping in specialist homelessness shelters and boarding houses
- living in supported accommodation
- living in severely crowded conditions, or
- staying with different friends, relatives and acquaintances (AIHW 2012, Chamberlain & McKenzie 1992).

What makes homeless people vulnerable during disasters?

There is currently little research on the specific vulnerabilities of homeless people in relation to disaster risk and there is a particular lack of Australian research. However, using theories on social vulnerability generally, together with research from the US on homelessness and on people living in poverty, some general risk factors can be identified. These include:

- lack of resources
- lack of access to services
- limited social inclusion, and
- pre-existing physical, mental and emotional stressors (Wisner 1998).

These four social, economic and personal factors affect the preparation, response and recovery of vulnerable groups. People living below the poverty line, without adequate or reliable shelter and limited social and economic opportunities, are less likely to be prepared, warned, found and evacuated, or provided adequate support post-disaster (Morrow 1999, Wisner 1998). Research on these vulnerabilities is reviewed in relation to disaster preparation, warnings, response and recovery.

Preparation and homelessness

Preparation for a disaster includes, at the individual level, having a disaster plan and gathering emergency supplies, and at the community level educating people about disasters, the effects and how to prepare for and respond to them (Fothergill & Peek 2004).

In relation to individual preparation and homelessness, there is no readily available research on the levels of disaster preparedness among homeless people. However, a US report on including homeless people in disaster planning (Edgington 2009) noted that they have no means to purchase and store extra resources such as protective gear, radios, batteries, food and clothing, and maps. Like other people experiencing poverty, they are far less likely to be physically prepared in a disaster because they lack the resources to do so (Fothergill &

Peek 2004). Also, few homeless people have access to shelter that is reliably temperature controlled or that can be modified to enhance its safety. They are not able to adequately prepare a home environment for extreme temperature emergencies like heat waves, storms and snow, or natural disasters such as fires or earthquakes (Ramin & Svoboda 2009).

In relation to community education about preparation, research into homelessness and disaster preparation in Tokyo noted the difficulty of reaching people who were homeless as they may not stay in the same place for any length of time. They also tend to be in places that are not easily visible or accessible (Uitto 1998). Aspects of limited resources and transience make planning, preparation and community engagement about disasters particularly challenging for this vulnerable group.

Warning communications, disaster responses and homelessness

Adequate warnings of possible or pending disasters require successfully disseminating understandable messages about risks. Risk communication and risk perception are particularly influenced by social and economic factors like poverty, social exclusion and physical and mental illness (Fothergill & Peek 2004, Njelesani *et al.* 2012, Fornili 2006), all of which are correlates of homelessness. People experiencing homelessness are less likely to have access to the mediums through which disaster warnings and information are commonly communicated i.e. television, radio, and internet. They are therefore less likely to know about an emergency or the recommended course of action (Edgington 2009).

Fothergill and Peek's (2004) summary of the relationship between poverty and risk perception suggests that people who are socially and economically disadvantaged (as are homeless people) may take warnings less seriously and be less likely to perceive them as valid. Spiers (n.d.) also found that risk perception is affected by mental illness. He found that how people perceive risk is related to aspects of the illness itself. People may have negative experiences with authority and experience negative effects from sudden changes in the environment. There are likely to be similar impacts on understanding risk for homeless people, particularly those who experience mental illness.

Disaster warnings like evacuation are more likely to be heeded by people in established accommodation, employed and financially secure (Enarson & Fordham 2001). If homeless people do use evacuation shelters, research in the US suggests that they may be subject to policing and surveillance. In addition, Tierney (2006) indicated they may be isolated and ostracised by others in the shelter because of their appearance or actions. Such research shows that the lack of resources, limited community inclusion, and pre-existing illnesses call for communication methods and disaster response services that acknowledge these factors.



People experiencing homelessness cannot always access the services they need.

Recovery and homelessness

The *Community Recovery Handbook* (AEMI 2011) indicates that disaster recovery is the reconstruction of the built environment, as well as the restoration of psychological, social, and economic wellbeing. There is no existing research with homeless people on the psychological and economic losses of disasters. However, there is some existing research on the recovery of people from low incomes and people with a physical and mental disability that may not be dissimilar from the challenges faced by the homeless.

When considering environmental and economic recovery, people on low incomes experience a greater proportionate loss of housing, finances and livelihoods (Fothergill & Peek 2004). This is related to them being unable to afford insurance or adequate cover, having no savings to fall back on, and being precariously employed in casual or marginal work that excludes sick leave entitlements. Despite not appearing to have a home or mainstream income, homeless people still face displacement and loss of income. During disaster recovery, safe places and sleeping places may be inaccessible. They are also unable to earn money from small enterprises (such as selling the *Big Issue* magazine), collecting recycling, or the bartering economy (Edgington 2009). People experiencing homelessness report greater stress over the loss of their income, and are more likely to report they have lost hope after a disaster (Fothergill & Peek 2004).

Disruption and loss of services provided to homeless people, such as temporary housing, health care, food distribution, and counselling, can affect recovery. These services may be overwhelmed by new clients who have been rendered homeless by the disaster event and resources may be stretched to accommodate those who were homeless before the disaster.

For homeless people their psychological recovery is likely to be influenced by pre-existing high rates of mental illness, substance abuse disorders, and poor physical health that may arise from the experience of homelessness and inadequate systems of care (Ramin

& Svoboda 2009). Pre-existing trauma heightens the experience of disaster and people experiencing homelessness are potentially more likely to experience higher emotional distress, negative psychological impacts, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Fothergill & Peek 2004). The psychological recovery of homeless people may also be compounded by the loss of pets (Thompson *et al.* 2014). Studies show that people who are homeless are strongly attached to their animals, and their loss is a source of profound grief (Irvine 2003, Slatter, Lloyd & King 2012).

Building the disaster resilience of the homeless

Two principles that could underpin disaster resilience programs for people experiencing homelessness are suggested. These are foregrounding social and economic inclusion, and linking with existing community connections using service providers.

Buckle, Mars and Smale (2000) argue that resilience is based in social and economic inclusion. Thus programs that increase disaster resilience for homeless people should begin by supporting this inclusion. These programs could include:

- training for agencies to develop disaster plans for themselves
- training for homeless people on what to expect in a disaster and where they can access assistance
- training for service providers and emergency personnel on working with homeless people in disasters
- outreach warning communication strategies
- specialist counseling services post-disaster, and
- funding schemes for recovery which support homeless people to establish new housing or supporting better shelter options if they choose not to live in accommodation.



Relief organisations have new clients who have become homeless by the disaster and their resources are stretched to accommodate those as well as those who were homeless before the disaster.

These programs might also build on existing community connections through service providers. People who are homeless generally have links to service providers through temporary accommodation, food distribution, or support and counselling services. These agencies are likely to be the best starting point for engaging with people about activities and ways to build their disaster preparedness.

Conclusion

Disaster resilience is the contemporary focus of disaster management. However, resilience policies and programs that don't acknowledge the effects of social and economic vulnerability on disaster resilience mean that many people and groups are being asked to prepare for, respond to and recover from disasters without the existing resources to do so. It is not possible to consider preparedness without asking 'are people able to afford the preparedness initiatives?', or consider communication without also asking 'are people able to purchase the communication devices?', or think about recovery without also asking 'is this funding targeted at people who own homes?'

In this paper, the current status of knowledge about the vulnerability and resilience of homeless people is reviewed and the question asked 'Can homeless people afford resilience?' The answer is 'no'. Homeless people include men, women and children. They are socially and economically marginalised, highly transient, and may be experiencing physical and mental illnesses, all of which are factors that affect their access to the resources needed for disaster preparedness, response and recovery. Full inclusion in disaster resilience for any vulnerable group can only be one part of a broader socially inclusive economic and social system. Building on existing community links and existing knowledge

about outreach, funding support and education is one part of the broader push towards reducing vulnerability. This review highlighted that there is limited research to build evidence-based programs. It is recommended that further research be conducted on disaster management inclusion of homeless members of communities that build resilience through ongoing social and economic inclusion.

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Research of this type informs the work related to vulnerable communities. Other articles in this area are welcome.