Understanding youth disaster recovery: The vital role of people, places, and activities

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ABSTRACT

As disasters escalate in frequency and severity, children and youth are among those most at risk for resulting adverse psychological, social, health, and educational effects. Although there is growing interest in the vulnerabilities and capacities of youth who have experienced disaster, research focusing on their lived experiences during the recovery period remains sparse. In response to this knowledge gap, youth between the ages of 13–22 were invited to participate in workshops spanning one to four days, where they used art, music, photography, videography, and other means to articulate their experiences of post-disaster recovery. The research took place in four disaster-affected communities in the United States and Canada, including Joplin, Slave Lake, Calgary, and High River. Youth stories revealed key people, places, and activities that supported their recovery, and the mechanisms through which those supports had a positive impact. Examining youth perspectives is important to concretize and contextualize theories of disaster recovery.

1. Introduction

To date, much disaster research has focused on adults, where individual recovery is defined as the return to a potential for social and economic engagement and growth, assessed by an individual's stabilization of housing, income, and employment, physical and mental well-being, and positive social role functioning [1]. Understanding disaster recovery from the perspective of children and youth has received relatively less scholarly attention; however, a growing body of research is beginning to explore youth adaptation to disasters and other traumatic events (e.g., [16,40,68,73]). This important work on children and youth identified a range of interacting vulnerabilities [21] (risks, stressors, and exposure), and protective or promotive factors for recovery and resilience at the personal (e.g., neurobiological, personality, past experience, self-regulation, agency), relational (e.g., parents, family, attachment systems), environmental (e.g., places and community), and cultural (e.g., norms, mores, and practices) levels [12,26,27,41,59].

According to Peek [46], children and youth are some of the most susceptible to the negative impacts of disasters including psychological morbidity, physical injury, sanitation-related illnesses and other health concerns, death, and the adverse impacts of losing child-friendly spaces (e.g., home, schools and playgrounds) including educational decline and school dropout. Despite this recognition of young people's vulner-

abilities in disaster, relatively little research has explored their specific needs or their perspectives on what supports recovery and resilience [2].

To address this gap, the Youth Creating Disaster Recovery and Resilience (YCDR[2]) project undertook a qualitative research study to explore disaster recovery from the perspective of youth affected by disasters. The YCDR[2] project was designed to inform theories and practices of disaster recovery by learning directly from the unique perspectives of youth about their own recovery process following a disaster. The goal was to inform a more inclusive, community-based, and youth-informed understanding of disaster recovery while also providing opportunities for disaster-affected youth to share their stories through creative expression.

2. Dimensions of disaster recovery

Previous studies that have explored youth and disasters are largely devoted to identifying predictors of post-disaster mental health outcomes [19,37,71] and do not often seek young people's narrative perspectives on their own recovery (although see [23]). Therefore, in addition to continued research on vulnerabilities and post-disaster trauma experienced by children and youth, an exploration of young people's lived experiences of disaster recovery in varied locations is also needed.

Past studies have identified several factors such as emotional attachment, positive coping skills, familial resources, and educational supports as important to the recovery of children and youth after a disaster [8,75]. When social structural supports are considered, however, the work tends to be adult-centric, exploring the ways that parents, teachers, and service providers help children and youth in the aftermath of an extreme event [48,5,62]. Yet, while adults are often found to be sources of support, few studies examine the role of peers in youth recovery [53] and even fewer examine social support from the perspectives of youth themselves.

Most of the disaster-research with children and youth that has focused on place, has focused primarily on the role of schools and home – places known to be important for children and youth because of the role they can play in providing stability, adult and peer support, and supervision (e.g., [23,43,60,77,78]), Less is known about the other places that may also contribute to youth disaster recovery, although preliminary evidence suggests that a broader range of places may be important. For instance, Fothergill and Peek [23] interviewed and observed children and youth after Hurricane Katrina and noted the importance of parks, playgrounds, ball fields, and other public spaces in facilitating recovery. Research is also beginning to emerge that examines the role of place attachment and place disruption in shaping the wellbeing, emotional regulation, identity development, and self-esteem of children in the home, school, and other post-disaster contexts [60]. Given these insights, more work is needed to explore which places are important to youth and why.

Along with people and places, certain activities are expected to support youth in disaster recovery in important ways. Writing, drawing, photography, and other creative outlets [24,44,54] as well as programs focused on sports and play (e.g., [30]), can be beneficial for children and youth during the recovery process [36]. In general, explorations of recovery-relevant activities typically examine interventions or coping strategies (e.g., [39]), but do not explore which activities and strategies youth select and deem to be most useful for their own recovery.

As research interest in youth and disaster recovery grows, it is important to identify a range of supports, including people, places, and activities, and explain the mechanisms through which these supports contribute to recovery. Further, there is a need for research that goes beyond a reliance on the reports of parents and teachers and the use of pre-coded research instruments [46] to engage young people directly to capture their perspectives of disaster and recovery [10,28]. While existing studies provide important information about predicting young people's disaster recovery, details about their lived experiences are needed to concretize and contextualize the models [70]. The creation of more fully elaborated social science theories depends on the use of participatory methods and approaches that offer youth opportunities to give voice to their thoughts and interpretations of events. This youth-centred orientation is important if practice, policy, and research are to more effectively address the significant and subtle differences that emerge when speaking with rather than about youth [9].

3. Present study and research questions

Over a three year period, the YCDR[2] research project engaged youth (aged 13–22) affected by wildfires, a tornado, and flooding, through an experiential, creative action research process. Using experiential activities and arts-based methods (e.g., photo elicitation, photo-story), researchers worked with youth to engage in critical reflection about their experiences of disaster recovery. The research questions specifically explored the youth's perspectives of which forms of support (i.e., people, places and activities) facilitated their recovery from disasters in each community.

4. Research sites

Four communities in North America were selected as research sites based on exposure to a natural disaster and engagement in mid- to long-term recovery processes.

4.1. Community 1

Slave Lake, Alberta, Canada (pop. ~ 7,000). Slave Lake is a small town located two and a half hours northwest of Edmonton on the southeastern edge of Lesser Slave Lake. On May 16, 2011, winds gusting to 100 km/hr drove a devastating fire into the Slave Lake community, forcing a community-wide evacuation. Although there were no reported deaths or injuries, 40% of the town was destroyed including the town hall, library, main shopping mall, and 374 homes.

4.2. Community 2

Joplin, Missouri, USA (pop. ~50,150). Joplin is the largest city in Jasper County in southwestern Missouri and serves as a hub to surrounding towns. On May 22, 2011, an EF-5 tornado (the highest magnitude on the Fujita scale) tore through Joplin. Over 160 people died in the tornado and 990 were injured. Nearly one-quarter of the city of Joplin was destroyed, including the complete devastation of over 2,000 buildings. This included the destruction of several schools, including Franklin Technical School and Joplin High School.

4.3. Community 3

Calgary, Alberta, Canada (pop. ~1,149,552). Calgary is the largest city in the province of Alberta. The city is located approximately 80 km east of the Canadian Rocky Mountains. On June 20–21, 2013, Calgary experienced unprecedented flooding. Following torrential rain, seven major tributaries and rivers rose and overflowed, causing severe damage to roads and bridges. Over 75,000 residents were forced to evacuate their homes, and many parts of the city, including the downtown business district, were without power for several days. One death directly related to the flooding in Calgary was reported.

4.4. Community 4

High River, Alberta, Canada (pop. ~ 12, 920). Located approximately 60 km south of Calgary, High River is a small town that sits along the Highwood River. Like Calgary, High River was also hit by the June 2013 floods in Southern Alberta. In High River, the flooding caused waters to rise above vehicles and necessitated the rescue of over 150 people. The entire city was forced to evacuate. Approximately 70% of homes in High River were damaged by the flooding, and 79 of the 83 buildings in town experienced significant damage, leading to the closure of numerous small businesses. Three flood-related deaths were reported in High River, and one was recorded in the nearby community of Okotoks.

5. Methods

Below, we briefly describe the community and youth engagement process and our research approach. Additional details regarding the overarching project goals and the methodological approach are described elsewhere [22].

6. Initial site visits

Our research team initiated the project in each community by reaching out to key stakeholders involved in disaster response and recovery efforts and those working directly with disaster-affected youth (e.g., local government, education, health care, business, non-profit and community-based organizations, faith-based organizations, and arts-based groups). We then conducted a preliminary site visit to gather information about the disaster and establish youth and community