



RURAL WILDFIRE STUDY

Families and Children: Responses to Wildfires Links to Community Resiliency



Photo: Judith C. Kulig

Background:

The May 2011 Slave Lake wildfires were unprecedented event in recent provincial and national history. They provide dramatic examples of the general increase in the number and intensity of wildfires specifically and natural disasters in general. It is prudent, therefore, to learn as much as we can from those who have experienced this event in order to improve our understanding and responses to such disasters.

Objective:

Link resiliency in a community context to the effects of wildfires on families and children.

Particular research questions were:

- 1) what are the impacts of the disaster on families and children?
- 2) how is the community dealing with recovery?
- 3) how is community recovery related to families and children's recovery?

Approach:

We conducted interviews with stakeholders (n=20), interviews with families (n=19) and children (ages 9-12; n=17), extensive fieldwork, a school-based survey with children (ages 8-18; n=160), and a household survey (n=550).

Results:

- The disaster was totally unexpected, but did not result in fatalities or major injuries among area residents.
- Firefighters, local authorities and leaders had to quickly make difficult decisions to save relevant infrastructure.
- Most residents were not prepared for the disaster and felt overwhelmed by the suddenness and severity of the fires.
- The process to restore normality creates multiple stresses that impacted the everyday lives of families.
- The people and their commitment to their community were major strengths that helped the recovery process.
- Many families underwent six main changes after experiencing the wildfires:

-Re-evaluation of life goals and priorities	-Changes in interactions within family units
-New routines	-Changes in interactions with the community
-Changes in attitudes	-Reconsideration of values and perceptions
- Since the fires, changes in living arrangements, financial assets and family relationships had the greatest impact on households.
- Children were affected by changes in family routines. Parents lacked the energy to deal with their children's needs.
- In many cases family members felt closer together and shared a sense of internal strength as a family.
- Some children had difficulties with emotions, concentration, behaviour, or getting along with people.
- Children most at risk for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) were mainly young (aged 7-11), females, and did not experience home loss.
- On average, parental assessment of PTSD was lower than what students reported in the schools.
- Local initiatives such as coordination of recovery efforts and social events have been helpful for families.

Recommendations:

- Maintain an updated community disaster plan that follows disaster planning protocols.
- Ensure that the community disaster plan is accessible to the public and promote the roles and responsibilities of community members.
- Ensure opportunities for collaboration in recovery efforts, and coordinate them to prevent duplication.
- Provide additional mental health services and psychological support for all community members for at least two years after the disaster.
- Assess family functioning and general coping processes of families and children for at least six years after the disaster.
- Provide additional services and resources for designated professionals (i.e., teachers, counsellors).
- Offer free sessions addressing family decision-making, financial planning, and general recovery processes.
- Encourage parents to provide factual information, to spend time with their children, and to promote conversations about their feelings.
- Provide opportunities for children and families to support one another (e.g., sport and music events).
- Plan occasions for acknowledging the efforts of stakeholders and community residents to address the disaster.

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