

Social Factors That Contribute to Promoting and Supporting Resilience in Children and Youth following Environmental Disasters: A Mixed Methods Approach

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Abstract : Abstract— In the last six years Canada has experienced two major and catastrophic environmental disasters- the 2013 Southern Alberta flood and the 2016 Fort McMurray, Alberta wildfire. These two disasters resulted in damages exceeding 12 billion dollars, the costliest disasters in Canadian history. In the aftermath of these disasters, many families faced the loss of homes, places of employment, schools, recreational facilities, and also experienced social, emotional, and psychological difficulties. Children and youth are among the most vulnerable to the devastating effects of disasters due to the physical, cognitive, and social factors related to their developmental life stage. Yet children and youth also have the capacity to be resilient and act as powerful catalyst for change in their own lives and wider communities following disaster. Little is known, particularly from a sociological perspective, about the specific factors that contribute to resilience in children and youth, and effective ways to support their overall health and well-being. This paper focuses on the voices and experiences of children and youth residing in these two disaster-affected communities in Alberta, Canada and specifically examines: 1) How children and youth's lives are impacted by the tragedy, devastation, and upheaval of disaster; 2) Ways that children and youth demonstrate resilience when directly faced with the adversarial circumstances of disaster; and 3) The cumulative internal and external factors that contribute to bolstering and supporting resilience among children and youth post-disaster. This paper discusses the characteristics associated with high levels of resilience in 183 children and youth ages 5 to 17 based on quantitative and qualitative data obtained through a mixed methods approach. Child and youth participants were administered the Children and Youth Resilience Measure (CYRM-28) in order to examine factors that influence resilience processes including: individual, caregiver, and context factors. The CYRM-28 was then supplemented with qualitative interviews with children and youth to contextualize the CYRM-28 resiliency factors and provide further insight into their overall disaster experience. Findings reveal that high levels of resilience among child and youth participants is associated with both individual factors and caregiver factors, specifically positive outlook, effective communication, peer support, and physical and psychological caregiving. Individual and caregiver factors helped mitigate the negative effects of disaster, thus bolstering resilience in children and youth. This paper discusses the implications that these findings have for understanding the specific mechanisms that support the resiliency processes and overall recovery of children and youth following disaster; the importance of bridging the gap between children and youth's needs and the services and supports provided to them post-disaster; and the need to develop resiliency processes and practices that empower children and youth as active agents of change in their own lives following disaster. These findings contribute to furthering knowledge about pragmatic and representative changes to resources, programs, and policies surrounding disaster response, recovery, and mitigation.

Keywords : children and youth, disaster, environment, resilience

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