Investigating Mental Health and Social Capital in Communities that Experienced Residential Displacement as a Result of the Saint John River flood of 2018

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Introduction
The 2018 spring flooding in New Brunswick devasted communities along the Saint John River. Thousands of people were displaced from their homes during the flood event. Research shows that more vulnerable segments of the population, specifically those experiencing poverty and/or social isolation, are at greater risk of longer-term housing precarity following disaster events (Fothergill and Peek, 2004; Lindell and Prater, 2003). Housing loss during and after natural disasters can lead to a number of physical and mental health issues including fatigue, depression, anxiety, grief, sleep disturbances, substance abuse, and the development of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Bromet et al., 2017; Parker et al., 2016).

Social capital can promote resilience and limit extended periods of homelessness in communities that have experienced natural disasters (Abramson et al., 2015). However, there has been no systematic study of the impact of social capital on housing trajectories, mental health, and community building following disasters in Canada. This study fills this gap by exploring community, mental health and social capital in residents who experienced the flood of the St. John River in the spring of 2018.

Research Objectives
The two main objectives of this research were:

1) To investigate residents’ experiences of mental health and well-being following flooding that led to housing damage, and in some cases, displacement.
2) To understand the role of social capital in responding to damage and displacement during and after flooding.

Methods
The researchers for this study developed a research plan to ensure they were able to collect data in a way that was minimally invasive for residents impacted by the flood. Semi-structured interviews were done with 10 key informants, including local community leaders and those with in-depth knowledge of the disaster relief efforts. Focus groups were also held with 20 participants who had experienced temporary or prolonged displacement due to the flood. The interviews and focus groups were conducted in January, February, March, and April of 2019.
Preliminary Findings

Key Informant interviews: Perceptions of community mental health and wellbeing

Community emotions: Some terms that were used to describe community emotions included: anxiety, devastation, mental exhaustion, worry and betrayal. However, the community displayed resilience and adaptability during and after the spring flood of 2018. All of the key informants described a sense of comradery and community as residents worked together to support their neighbours.

First responders’ wellbeing: the study found that the flooding event also had an impact on the mental health and wellbeing of the first responders. Many who worked overtime during the 2018 floods lived in flooded areas themselves and were dealing with their own losses at the same time, showing the need for first responders to have resources to maintain their own wellbeing.

Key Informant interviews: Social capital and flood response

Community response: All of the key informants described the importance of community in the response and recovery process. Many of the key informants noted that, despite the tragedy associated with flooding, communities were able to build positive networks and relationships.

Resources: The Canadian Red Cross and the EMO provided supports and resources to residents following the flood event. However, the key informants reported socioeconomic disparities during the flood and in the recovery phase. Those with less economic resources struggled more than those who had the resources to pay for repairs and expenses up front. Similarly, those with strong social connections were able to use their social capital for additional assistance.

Focus Groups: Impacts on mental health and wellbeing

This study found there to be both positive and negative impacts on the wellbeing of the affected residents. Positive impacts included residents feeling “lucky” and “blessed” to be helped by so many neighbours and volunteers. Negative impacts included feelings of stress and feeling helpless while trying to save their homes and some residents described feelings of “survivor’s guilt”. Some reported additional stress due to an inability to navigate the claims system or to provide the necessary documentation to receive compensation for their losses.

Conclusion

This study highlights the impacts of the 2018 spring flood in New Brunswick on the mental health of residents. The community came together to help one another which led to positive community growth, which promotes good mental health. However, the impacts of the flood had negative impacts on the affected residents. Stress, worry, anxiety, feelings of betrayal and despair, and PTSD were described by residents. Those with more access to resources and social capital networks appeared to fare better during the flood response and recovery. In the case of the 2018 flood, socioeconomic, demographic and geographic factors contributed to unequitable access to resources and supports.