Social work disaster practice: Enhancing skills, community connections, and external relationships

Kathryn Hay[1], Katheryn Margaret Pascoe[2], Lee Henley[3], Fiona Knight[3], Kate Stewart and Gabor Radik[3]

[1] Massey University
[2] University of Otago
[3] Social worker

ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: Natural and human-made disasters, including climate change, pandemics, and other hazards such as earthquake and flooding can have considerable negative impact on all communities in Aotearoa New Zealand. This article uses a case study approach to describe the experiences and reflections of social workers in relation to disaster practice.

METHODS: This phase of the research project included semi-structured interviews with 11 registered social workers who had been involved in disaster management in Aotearoa New Zealand. The case studies were examined using thematic analysis to identify key themes. This article draws on four of the 11 interviews grouped together after thematic analysis, enabling detailed exploration of experiences.

FINDINGS: Analysis of the interviews identified that the transferable skills and knowledge of social workers are important for disaster practice; social workers are effective in connecting with individuals and communities; and improved professional relationships, systems, and processes are required so that the community is better supported following future disaster events.

IMPLICATIONS: Social workers practise locally but are situated within an international context that is underpinned by global definitions, agendas, and goals. These, and local codes and standards, offer a rationale and framework for effective social work disaster practice. Stronger connection between the social work profession and the national emergency management organisation in Aotearoa New Zealand will build social capital and signal the profession's commitment to community resilience in the context of disaster practice.

Keywords: Natural disaster; social capital; skills; knowledge; social work; community resilience

Background

This article is one of a series that explores the experiences of social workers who have been actively engaged in disaster management efforts, often following natural disaster events in Aotearoa New Zealand (see Hay & Pascoe, 2021, 2022; Hay et al., 2021). While the four social workers profiled in this article reflected on their own locally situated experience, the findings can be considered in light of more recent emergency situations such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the significant flooding event in the upper North Island in 2023 (Drolet et al., 2021; Fraser & Aldrich, 2021).

Social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand are trained in a range of psychosocial and

community development approaches that are transferable across fields of practice and client groups (Beddoe et al., 2018). The curriculum also incorporates Māori and Pacific models of practice as well as learning about Te Tiriti o Waitangi and its relevance for social work practice (Ruwhiu, 2019). Social workers understand people within their environmental and social context, often drawing on an ecological system and person-centred or person-directed lens that enables them to identify strengths and resources of individuals and communities (Alston et al., 2019). Social workers are guided by the Global Definition of Social Work and the values entrenched in the *Code of Ethics*, both of which highlight empowerment, respecting diversity, enhancing wellbeing, and challenging injustice (ANZASW, 2019; IFSW, 2014).

Although schools of social work have some autonomy in decision-making regarding the teaching of specific theories, models, skills, and practice approaches, the Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB) (2021) specifies:

> The curriculum will reflect the principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities that are central to social work, underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge. (p. 4)

These principles ultimately provide a strong rationale for social work engagement in disaster management (Drolet et al., 2022), especially as the impacts from disaster events disproportionately affect marginalised and vulnerable groups (Alston et al., 2019; Drolet et al., 2021). This was also evident recently during the global Covid-19 pandemic (Golightley & Holloway, 2020).

The Global Agenda also contributes to social work practice in New Zealand as it seeks to raise the profile and visibility of social work and enable social workers to contribute to policy development at local and international levels (Jones & Truell, 2012). Awareness and application of the Agenda in Aotearoa New Zealand however, including in the tertiary curriculum, is currently unknown. More recently, the New Zealand government has committed itself to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Saunders et al., 2020). The 17 goals are a call for action at the local and global levels to reduce poverty and inequality, improve education and health, and promote economic growth alongside the protection of the natural environment and the curbing of climate change. While there is debate as to whether the SDGs lack a commitment to human rights, many of the SDGs have direct relevance to social work (Healy, 2017). In fact, social workers could claim to be actively supporting the achievement of the goals in their everyday activities, such as supporting people into housing, seeking access to justice and peace, achieving food security, and enhancing health and wellbeing (Dominelli, 2014). In addition, five goals specifically mention disasters (Alston et al., 2019).

In New Zealand, the profile of social work disaster practice has been shown to be limited (Hay & Pascoe, 2021), yet there is considerable evidence of involvement of social workers in the different phases of disaster management (for example, Maher & Maidment, 2013; van Heugten, 2014). These disaster management phases are commonly referred to as reduction, readiness, response, and recovery. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the government department National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) is responsible for leadership and supporting response and recovery efforts. At a regional level, local authorities establish civil defence groups who engage in activity across the disaster management phases. In the welfare area, which focuses on ensuring the wellbeing of communities, civil defence groups are tasked with building capacity and capability with first responder organisations such as Red Cross, Oranga Tamariki, Salvation Army and hospitals (Hay & Pascoe, 2021). While social workers are positioned in all these agencies, as well

as many other fields of practice, awareness of how they can effectively contribute to disaster management activities seems surprisingly low from some staff in civil defence groups (Hay & Pascoe, 2021).

In addition, it is not known, except anecdotally, whether social work students are being taught about disaster management and relevant international policy documents such as the Global Definition and Agenda and the SDGs. Although social workers have a unique set of skills, knowledge, and values, as well as awareness of local and cultural contexts, their understanding of how these can be effectively utilised in disaster management may therefore be limited.

The following case studies offer insights into aspects of disaster response and recovery that can be transferred into future emergency situations. Both individual social workers and the wider profession, including the Schools of Social Work and professional organisations such as the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW), are encouraged to improve qualifying curricula, continuing professional development opportunities and relationships with key disaster management organisations.

Methods

The four case studies discussed in this article were drawn from the final stage of a qualitative project designed to explore social workers' involvement in disasters in Aotearoa New Zealand and their role, capacity, utility, and training needs in disaster practice. So that their experiences can be honoured with detail, the experiences of only four social workers are drawn on here with recent and future publications focusing on the remaining participants (see Hay & Pascoe, 2021, 2022; Hay et al., 2021). The primary research question was:

> How have registered social workers been involved in disaster management in their professional role in New Zealand?

Starting with a content analysis of social work (phase one), social workers, and emergencies (disasters) in Aotearoa New Zealand online media between 2006 and 2016 it was found that "social workers and their emergency related practice remains largely invisible in Aotearoa [New Zealand]'s online media" (Hay & Pascoe, 2018, p. 5).

Phase two involved semi-structured interviews with disaster management professionals who were not social workers. Findings indicated a limited understanding about social worker capabilities and prior involvement in disaster management, reinforcing their largely invisible role and raising concerns about the utility of social workers in this space.

The phase three survey findings reported social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand had been involved in all stages of disaster management, both in their local geographical region and in other affected areas. Most participants, however, believed their knowledge and skills were underutilised (Hay & Pascoe, 2021). Taking a nested sample approach (Yin, 2012), survey participants were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews in the fourth phase to develop case studies for teaching purposes, to stimulate discussion with social work and emergency organisations, and to assist with training of professionals in the disaster management space.

Eleven registered social workers (RSWs) participated in these interviews. All had been involved in response and recovery efforts and several had also engaged in risk reduction and readiness planning. The disaster events focused on by the participants included the 2010 and 2011 series of earthquakes in Canterbury, the North Canterbury or Kaikōura/Wairau earthquake of 2016, and a flooding situation in the North Island of Aotearoa New Zealand. All participants agreed to be named in their case studies.

Interview transcripts were approved by participants before being developed into case studies by the two authors. For consistency, a set format was applied: the context; the practice environment; practice approaches; challenges; lessons learned; reflections for other professionals. The participants were invited to edit the case studies to ensure accuracy and strengthen the trustworthiness and credibility of the data (Tracey, 2010) enhancing the reflexivity of the authors who were not present during or after the disasters being discussed (Braun & Clark, 2019). Guided by the framework approach of Ritchie and colleagues (2014), thematic analysis was applied to the case studies to identify concepts and themes. Based on this analysis, decisions were made about which case studies would sit alongside each other in subsequent publications. The following four case studies were grouped thematically, identifying similarities in the experiences and learnings shared by the participants. The project received low-risk ethics approval (notification 4000019500) from Massey University, Aotearoa New Zealand.

Social worker case studies

Kate, an RSW living in Whanganui, was studying for her PhD when a significant flooding event occurred in the region in 2004. The flooding destroyed homes, communication lines, roads, and bridges, killed livestock, and isolated communities. Media reported the disaster as a once in 100-years flood, and an emergency was declared for the Manawatū-Whanganui region at 8pm on February 17, lasting until midnight on February 25. Kate volunteered with the local civil defence group and undertook home visits that focused on psychosocial support and counselling.

The other three participants were involved in social work practice in response to the catastrophic 6.3 magnitude earthquake on February 22, 2011, which struck approximately 10km southeast of

Christchurch. At the time of the quake, Fiona was a team leader for a large non-government organisation (NGO) that held a government contract for disaster response. Based in Auckland, she was part of an immediate response group of 50 staff sent to Christchurch where she worked for eight days. For the first two days, under instruction of the local civil defence, Fiona was placed into an interdisciplinary team that conducted welfare and safety checks in a residential area. Each team consisted of one NGO representative (social workers, pastoral care workers and volunteers), an engineer, and a builder. From day three to eight, Fiona worked with the flying squad which was called upon if the initial welfare and safety check teams encountered concerns that required specialist intervention.

Lee was managing a community mental health and addictions team at a hospital in the North Island when the 2011 earthquake struck. Following a request from the Canterbury Health Board for additional social workers, Lee travelled to Christchurch and worked in the crisis psychiatric service for one week before returning home. Lee was paired with a community psychiatric nurse and conducted initial screening assessments.

Gabor was living in Christchurch in 2011, working at an NGO that offered a range of services including a night shelter and drop-in centre for people experiencing homelessness. In the following weeks Gabor's work was wide-ranging. The NGO staff distributed food parcels and water, ran a night shelter, completed door-to-door visits and assessments, made referrals, and had a mobile van which they would park in prominent locations for people to access support or assistance as required.

The experiences of the participants are both varied and similar, which emphasises the wide-ranging disaster practice social workers may encounter. Two of the participants were flown in to assist for a short period of time while the other

two participants had experienced the disaster event themselves and remained in the affected community afterwards. The learning from their experiences contribute to a growing scholarship on the knowledge and skills of social workers in disaster management in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The transferability of social work knowledge and skills

The transferable skills and knowledge that social workers develop in their training is a strength in disaster practice. When a disaster event occurs, many basic facilities and services are disrupted—people can become hypervigilant, so creative thought is required to identify solutions in a resource-constrained environment. In a crisis, stress impacts people in different ways and they may be too close to the situation to think practically. Therefore, an outside perspective from someone skilled in problem-solving can help provide achievable solutions. Fiona, for example, met a resident who had run out of medication to manage his schizophrenia. Uncertain of how to access more medication with many businesses closed, Fiona was able to assist by contacting an alternative pharmacy to prescribe his medication. Similarly, Fiona visited a young woman who was upset about her toilet not working and having to use a bucket in the garden. The lack of privacy was distressing for her. Despite not being able to have the toilet fixed, Fiona recommended the bucket be used in the bathroom to offer some privacy, a suggestion which was quickly adopted by the young woman. By exploring challenges and prioritising needs together, a social worker can assist people and communities in setting appropriate goals. Goal setting encourages people to coordinate their thoughts and focus on obtainable tasks, effectively introducing some structure in a chaotic environment. Kate found that using visual aids such as drawing a mind map or writing lists on large pieces of paper provided a way for people to process their thoughts during goal setting. These creative resources can be used as working documents and be reviewed at each session to track progress and reassess priorities in a dynamic, evolving situation.

Following a disaster event, social workers may also be required to do tasks outside of their usual remit, thus requiring adaptability. Fiona, for instance, was called to the residence of an elderly person with early-stage Alzheimer's disease whose water cylinder had blown and flooded her home. Although the resident had shown resilience in her capability to manage the aftermath of the initial earthquake as well as the recent death of her husband, the hot water cylinder was a tipping point, and she was distraught when Fiona arrived. Fiona's role was to negotiate the woman's relocation into a rest home and put steps in place to ensure the security of her valued possessions. This included re-homing her cat and depositing a shoe box full of cash on behalf of the resident under the supervision of a security guard and colleague.

Working with people from diverse backgrounds with varying needs also requires flexibility and the ability to adapt skills and knowledge into new contexts. This can present as a challenge when working in a time-constrained environment, as investment in relationship-building before exploring needs, challenges or goals may be necessary. For example, although she is a Pākeha social worker, Kate was allocated an older Māori woman who was living alone in a rural community and experiencing conflicts with neighbours. Having no prior relationship with the woman, Kate spent the first session meeting her ancestors and hearing information about her family through pictures hanging on the walls of the house. Demonstrating adaptability, this was an effective approach to building rapport and developing a relationship in this situation.

For social workers arriving from out of town to support the disaster response and recovery process, improvisation is also critical. Fiona and Lee both experienced disruption in their accommodation arrangements. Fiona described her experience:

>…I had my own tent and I had all the food and all the camping gear with me, and I would've been quite happy to sleep in my tent in a park but then, not knowing where I was going to sleep each night was, I found quite stressful. I found out about myself that I can do anything in the day as long as I know that tonight I have a bed to sleep in somewhere.

Further, social workers coming from outside the disaster-affected area will be required to make new professional relationships, often in multi-disciplinary contexts, and quickly orientate themselves to the geographical location. Disaster events are often not discrete and so even though social workers may not have experienced the initial event they still have to manage being in an affected area, often with ongoing impacts, for instance aftershocks or further flooding. Drawing upon the breadth of social work skills and knowledge, including those in relation to self-care and relationship-building, is essential.

Connecting with individuals and communities

Demonstrating the core social work values of empowerment and self-determination (IFSW, 2014), participants stressed the importance of enabling individuals and communities to take the lead on what they wanted to address to offer a greater sense of control in a time of crisis. The participants discussed the relevance of ecological systems theory informing their practice. At a micro level, each resident and their family have their own agency, strengths, resources, and knowledge that can be drawn upon to address their own

needs. At a meso level, local communities, such as neighbourhoods, schools and workplaces contain additional resources and skills that can be harnessed to support one another. At a macro level, there are often multiple NGOs and government services that engage in disaster response efforts. At each level, resilience of individuals and communities must be recognised and supported for effective response and recovery efforts.

Social workers must listen to the expressed needs of individuals and communities to ensure they are not imposing their own, or external, perspectives or basing their practice on assumptions. Focusing on the distribution of food, shelter, and water rather than therapeutic work is likely to be the first task for social workers in the response phase, as experienced by Gabor. Kate also found that people initially wanted to talk about practical needs such as power, water, accommodation and verify information regarding ongoing support. Although primarily undertaking mental health assessments with individuals, Lee also noted it was important to remain mindful that much of the community was impacted by the trauma of the disaster and therefore making connections at both levels was necessary.

Connecting at a community level, social workers can encourage and support local solutions to local problems that have been identified by community members. Fiona actively engaged at a meso-level to avoid encouraging a dependency on herself or the NGO. This was evident when she was approached by several residents who expressed concerns about an elderly neighbour needing support with meals. Fiona called a street meeting to establish a plan for residents to provide food for one another as well as check on the resident of concern. By pooling skills and resources, a community-based response was possible, demonstrating to residents that they still held agency to respond to some of their own needs without solely relying on external

supports. The importance of a multi-level approach was supported by Gabor who noted his effective practice was related to understanding the local context:

> It was probably my knowledge of the services around there and my social work skills in terms of connecting people to the right services at that time. But again some of them were shut down because of the earthquake, so it was finding out which ones were still operating and which wasn't… (Gabor)

Further, Lee highlighted social workers "… are kinda good at making these networks and connecting services up so we can take quite a lead role there I think." This illustrates the importance of understanding the internal and external systems present, being able to link people together, draw upon existing strengths and connect with community resourcing to ensure effective and sustainable response and recovery efforts.

Strengthening external relationships

Working in a disaster-affected context led to a series of recommendations from the participants. These largely focused on the importance of improving systems and processes between social workers and external organisations.

An improved relationship between NEMA, local civil defence groups, social workers and the social work profession was recommended by all the participants. In Kate's experience, there was a lack of coordination, structure, and accountability in the management of home visits by the civil defence staff. This disorganised approach reflected the chaos of the time; however, it also gave rise to uncertainty and the impression that welfare was an afterthought in the response efforts. When guidance or standardised procedures were lacking, the participants relied on their professional training and experience to inform their

engagement with colleagues, communities, and affected individuals.

Kate recommended that welfare and emotional well-being should become entrenched in disaster reduction, planning, response, and recovery efforts in the NEMA. Further, she suggested NEMA develop a flow chart of responsibilities with key contacts to improve coordination and develop a united response effort. The flow chart could be accessible to all organisations expected to participate in each phase of disaster management. Responsibility for addressing welfare needs could be outsourced to social service organisations; however, NEMA and the local civil defence groups, as the operationalising bodies, should maintain strong relationships with them to ensure effective collaboration in times of disaster. In disaster planning, they should be able to identify key people trained in disaster management in each organisation who can coordinate their own staff, be key contacts for on-going communication, and provide a chain of accountability. Gabor reflected:

> I think social workers have a really good knowledge of the community because they work in it, and they work with the people so maybe if the civil defence [organisation] or the Army, they want to work with the community hand in hand then maybe the social workers could give them some guidance around it, who are the services they could actually dip into…

Fiona advocated for the establishment of a national disaster volunteer register. This process could involve a central agency, such as the Ministry of Social Development or the ANZASW, calling for an expression of interest from social workers and assessing each applicant's skills, knowledge, and expertise before being placed on an approved disaster response register. This would provide NEMA and civil defence groups with a pool of vetted and equipped people with specialist skills that could be

deployed to a disaster zone, rather than the current ad hoc recruitment of volunteers. The coordination of a register could also increase the number of social workers ready and able to assist post-disaster. As Fiona commented, "But just imagine if we had another disaster, god forbid, but if we did and civil defence was able to go to ANZASW and say right I want 50 qualified social workers on the ground thanks very much. And for that to happen. How amazing would that be."

Discussion

The aim of this research was to explore how social workers have been involved in disaster management in their professional role in Aotearoa New Zealand. The participants in this article had all engaged in immediate response efforts following a disaster event. Their activities ranged from assessment and therapeutic work with individuals to mobilising neighbourhoods to support one another, thus building connection as a localised community. The involvement of the participants in both individual and community practice emphasises the importance of both elements in qualifying programmes and post-qualifying activity (Staniforth et al., 2011).

Critique of current generic social work qualifications suggests an emphasis on micro-practice and a general neglect of community practice and other transformative social work approaches, including disaster practice (van Heugten, 2014). Mapping of the declared curriculum in 14 Aotearoa New Zealand social work programmes in 2016 did not highlight any topics or course titles related to social work practice and disasters or to environmental justice (Ballantyne et al., 2019). With the very real impacts of climate change now upon us, and the subsequent increase in natural disaster events, such as the significant flooding event in the upper North Island, including Auckland, in January 2023, all schools of social work should be analysing their current curricula to ensure inclusion of relevant teaching content (Boetto et al., 2021; Drolet et al., 2021). Social work disaster theory (see Alston et al., 2019), for example, interlinks international and local values and experience, and places environmental and social justice at the core of practice.

The integrative perspective of recognising complexities in a person's lived experience as well as broader social issues was evident in the stories of the research participants. Disaster events can exacerbate people's existing concerns or health issues in both the short and long term and it is well known that there are disproportionate impacts on marginalised people and minority groups (Alston et al., 2019; Blake et al., 2017; Drolet et al., 2021). Access to resources such as medication, housing, and basic supplies such as water can all be significantly affected following a disaster and advocacy is necessary at individual and community levels. As the participants noted, much of their practice occurred with individuals; however, there were some opportunities to facilitate community action, especially amongst neighbours. Recent disaster practice scholarship has emphasised the need for building social infrastructure and community resilience as an alternative approach to both pre-disaster preparation and mitigation and also post-disaster response and recovery (Aldrich & Meyer, 2022; Rammah et al., 2022). Emergency organisations encourage people to have three days of food and water in preparation for a disaster event (see https://getready.govt.nz/), however, building stronger ties within local communities, especially neighbourhoods, could prove to be just as, if not more, important (Aldrich & Meyer, 2022; Rammah et al., 2022). Neighbours, in particular, have been identified as an "… aspect of individual and community social capital that provides access to resources in disaster situations, including information, financial and nonfinancial aid, and emotional and psychological support" (Aldrich & Meyer, 2022, p. 202). Rammah et al. (2022) suggested this type of social support in the

post-disaster phase has a protective effect on people's wellbeing.

Transformative social work practice has relevance here as it encompasses intervention at multiple levels including focusing on the needs of individuals, families and communities while considering "the relationship between personal issues and the broader social and political context and the factors that facilitate social change" (Munford & Sanders, 2019, pp. 140–141).

There is a potential disconnect, however, between the values underpinning current government approaches to emergency management and social work ideals. The dominant discourse in the disaster management field, and specifically in the government emergency management organisation, is underpinned by values of individualism and self-reliance (Blake et al., 2017). These diverge from a critical social work ideology that society is unjust and inequitable and that societal structures affect the distribution of resources (Weinberg, 2016). Marginalised and diverse populations are disproportionately impacted, and yet neoliberal policies assume that all people have agency to prepare for and support themselves following a disaster event (Blake et al., 2017; Rammah et al., 2022). Social workers, and the wider social work profession, therefore, have a responsibility to bring their commitment to social change to conversations on improvements to current disaster management systems as well as to consider how local communities can be supported prior to and following disaster experiences (Maglajlic, 2019). As social workers are currently less visible in disaster planning, risk reduction and policy development (Alston et al., 2019; Hay & Pascoe, 2021), the social work profession needs to proactively build new relationships with emergency organisations as part of their investment in, and commitment to, building community resilience (Rammah et al., 2022).

ANZASW, as the largest social work professional association in Aotearoa New Zealand, is well-placed to facilitate this process and to develop a partnered approach to social work disaster practice with NEMA and local civil defence groups. Joint webinars or training sessions, at both national and local levels, would enable reciprocal learning opportunities. Social workers would advance their knowledge of emergency response, and civil defence and emergency professionals could extend their understanding of the breadth and importance of social work practice.

In addition, the establishment of a social work disaster practice professional learning community within ANZASW would build capability and practice knowledge and experience to be drawn upon in future disaster situations. Communities of practice are recognised for enabling the generation of ideas that can be tried in practice and then reflected on for further learning and improved future practice (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2022). Such a forum would offer a space for social workers to collectively engage, collaborate and learn with and from each other and effectively be part of a disaster planning and mitigation process. Linking in education providers would also enhance current curricula in disaster practice. Students, including in Aotearoa New Zealand the Student Volunteer Army, have often been key contributors to disaster response efforts (Carlton et al., 2022; Smith et al., 201 4). Social work students could usefully contribute to future efforts either as crisis volunteers (Carlton et al., 2022) or in a professional capacity post-qualifying.

In combination, these actions can facilitate the development of social capital between and within the social work profession and the emergency management sector. Social capital describes ties between groups, including those with perceived or actual power and respect and trust are embodied in these formal or informal networks (Aldrich & Meyer, 2022). Communities with trust in

agencies or individuals within organisations are more likely to comply with requests or direction, as was evident in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic (Fraser & Aldrich, 2021). As has been shown by the Student Volunteer Army's work, fostering collaborative relationships with disaster management organisations, whilst maintaining an element of distance, can enable the effective mobilisation of volunteers as well as access to important briefings or information (Carlton et al., 2022). There are lessons to be learned here by the social work profession in Aotearoa New Zealand so we can more effectively, and in a more coordinated fashion, assist during future disaster events.

Conclusion

The involvement of social workers in disaster practice has received growing attention over the past 20 years, although we may still not be especially visible or included by national emergency organisations. Given the international and local principles underpinning the profession and commitments to social and environmental justice, social workers have a strong rationale for continued and increased involvement. While individual social workers can be active in local communities, especially following disaster events, social work bodies, such as professional organisations and schools of social work, can also be proactive in advancing social work knowledge and credibility in this space. Proactive collaboration between these bodies and emergency management stakeholders can build social capital, a key contributor to community resilience in disaster contexts.

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