

Helping the aged during natural disasters

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When earthquake, tsunami, tornado or flood strike, among the most vulnerable group are the elderly. Writing in the *International Journal of Emergency Management*, researchers in New Zealand suggest that emergency response plans must take into account the age-related needs of adults with regards to the personal and social resources they have available.

Robyn Tuohy and Christine Stephens of Massey University in Palmerston North, point out that elderly citizens are likely to experience the negative impacts of floods and other [natural disasters](#) partly because of age-related disabilities but also because of social circumstances, such as isolation. The team has explored the issues surrounding such vulnerability based on case studies of older adults who experienced a flood disaster and compared those experiences among those living in a rest home or independently in the community.

Vulnerability is defined as the ability of a person or group to pre-empt, cope with and recover from a natural disaster, the team explains, determining who is most at risk should ensure better outcomes. Previous studies have suggested that vulnerability is affected by class, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status (SES) and age, it is also determined to some extent by the type of disaster that occurs. Tuohy and Stephens add that the [World Health Organisation](#) (WHO) has identified older adults as a vulnerable population who are more likely to experience greater risks and adversity than others in any disaster.

The implications are supported by recent evidence. For instance,

research following [Hurricane Katrina](#), which devastated New Orleans in 2005, revealed disproportionately poorer outcomes for older adults compared to other population groups, the Indonesian tsunami of 2004 saw the highest death rates among the over-sixties; deaths during the 2003 Paris heat wave killed more people over 70 years than any other group; and more than half of all casualties in the 1995 Kobe earthquake were older adults, with 90% of deaths in this group.

An important aspect of how demographics are developing, the team adds, is that the population is aging so that there is a greater proportion of people over 65 years in many countries. Although many older adults will be cared for in a rest home environment, a greater proportion will be self-reliant and living independently in the community, the team adds. Demographic projections suggest that there will be an almost threefold increase in the global population over 65 within the next half century.

"In a disaster situation, the interaction of personal and social vulnerability will influence the ability of older adults to prepare, respond to and recover from such an event. A disaster will amplify both personal and social challenges facing older adults, and as a result older adults become more vulnerable to experiencing negative outcomes during disasters," the team says. "Emergency preparedness planning must take into account the age-related needs of [older adults](#)."

More information: "Exploring older adults' personal and social vulnerability in a disaster," Int. J. Emergency Management, 2011, 8, 60-73

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