

Risk of Domestic Violence after Flood Impact: Effects of Social Support, Age, and History of Domestic Violence

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Community professionals observed an increase in domestic violence during the aftermath of the 1997 Grand Forks flood. In the past, research has documented emotional symptoms which result from natural disaster, and separate studies have observed domestic violence to result from these same emotional symptoms. No research was found, however, specifically on the effects of natural disaster on domestic violence. The purpose of the current study was to test the effects of a model of variables on domestic violence, including flood impact, the emotional symptoms, as well as other intervening variables which might act as a buffer against the effects of flood impact. Results of this cross-sectional survey of 140 Grand Forks adults indicated that domestic violence was significantly greater among respondents after the flood. Flood impact led to increased levels of anxiety, depression, and hostility. Whether these emotional symptoms subsequently led to increased domestic violence depended on the level of social support, the age of the respondent, and whether he/she had a history of domestic violence before the flood. Those with lower social support, the elderly, and those with a prior history of violence were most affected. The results have implications for work with the elderly, with domestic violence treatment and prevention programs, and with communities affected by flood.

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The Grand Forks flood of 1997 appeared to result in traumatic family-related effects, as reflected in a reported 24% increase in domestic violence between July 1996 and July 1997 (Community Violence Intervention Center, undated). The purpose of this study was to document any connection between flood exposure and domestic violence. Results provided important information for the city in deciding on priorities for funding, and for professionals in working with clients affected by this problem.

The Missouri Model, developed in 1995, explains the phases of disaster (Lystad, 1995). It begins with the heroic phase, a time when a community bands together in attempts to save its town from natural disaster. The phases of recovery continue with the honeymoon phase. Community support is high in this phase; citizens are filled with elation at surviving the catastrophic event. The honeymoon phase is short-lived, however, and is followed by the disillusionment phase, which is often the longest and most problematic part of recovery. There are often feelings of anger, resentment, and disappointment related to the disaster itself and the problems arising from it. The disillusionment can last up to three years, eventually progressing into the reconstruction phase. In this final phase, the community comes to the realization that the infrastructure is returning to its predisaster state. The process of recovery ends when people feel that life is back to normal.

This disaster model helps to support our major research question. The disillusionment phase in particular explains stressful reactions occurring in reaction to the flood. We theorized that these reactions could have led to increased domestic violence in Grand Forks. In the opinion of the authors, the community appeared to be in the disillusionment phase at the time of the study, having already experienced (1) the heroic phase, involving their sandbagging and evacuation efforts, and (2) the honeymoon phase, which was characterized by an extraordinary level of goodwill and cohesion in the community. At the time of the study, the community appeared to be experiencing disillusionment because hopes for, and promises of aid were not yet fulfilled (Lystad, 1995). A questionnaire distributed by the Grand Forks Herald appeared to support the view that the community was in the disillusionment phase (Bradbury, 1997).

Few studies have been conducted with flood exposure as an independent variable. Emotional symptoms found to increase after experiencing a flood include anxiety (Tobin & Ollenburger, 1996) and depression (Phifer, 1990; Tobin & Ollenburger, 1996). These symptoms were found to be more severe for the elderly and for those with lower income (Phifer, 1990). Phifer noted effects of gender—specifically, physical wellbeing decreased more for men after a flood—but Tobin and Ollenburger (1996) found that emotional symptoms increased equally for both men and women. We found no studies which measured the influence of phase of recovery on disaster effects.

Literature on exposure to other types of natural disaster also indicates an increase in anxiety and depression, in addition to hostility (Gavazzi, Julian, & McKenry, 1996). Anderson and Manuel (1994) found an increase in stress following an earthquake, especially among women.

No studies were found which addressed the effects a flood may have on domestic violence, but Anderson and Manuel (1994) found that sexual assault against women increased 300% after an earthquake. In addition, evidence exists that anxiety, depression, and hostility, the same emotional symptoms found to result from natural disaster,

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