PUBLIC HEALTH

Coping with disaster

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Credit: Wenn UK/Alamy Stock Photo

When natural disasters result in the destruction of homes, government agencies may step in to rehouse displaced citizens, which can lead to the break-up of communities. Socialization and community support are known to impact quality of life — especially for the elderly, for whom social contact protects against cognitive and physical deterioration.

Hiroiyuki Hikichi of Harvard University, USA, and colleagues took advantage of a natural experiment to look at the impact of relocation on the social connections of elderly residents of Iwanuma city ($n = 175$ out of a 3,421 analytic sample) following the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami. The authors compared survey data taken 7 months before the disaster with follow-up data collected 2.5 years after. While controlling for individual personality and experiences of disaster trauma, the results showed that those who were relocated individually experienced a decline in their perception of social cohesion and participation in social activities. For those relocated in groups, the opposite pattern held.

Ensuring that communities are preserved can bolster resilience to and recovery from disaster. This work highlights both the importance of considering the longer-term effects of natural disaster responses and the strength of natural experiments for investigating complex social phenomena.

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