

Post-Traumatic Stress among Evacuees from the 2016 Fort McMurray Wildfires

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Introduction

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is characterized by ‘intrusive thoughts and memories, avoidance, alterations in mood, cognition and hyperarousal’, that a person can develop after experiencing a traumatic event, such as a natural disaster. The Fort McMurray wildfires in May 2016 destroyed many homes and led to the displacement of 90,000 people. Evacuees faced direct impacts to their health and well-being, and suffered economic losses due to this event. Months after, evacuees were still displaced and living with uncertainty about the future.

Research Question(s)

Due to their unpredictable nature, it is difficult to obtain empirical data about a traumatic event, such as a natural disaster. The objectives of this research was to quickly document PTSD symptoms in a sample of Fort McMurray evacuees during the aftermath of the wildfires. This study estimated the prevalence of various symptoms and documented factors that could be associated with the severity of these symptoms.

Methods

Two clinical psychology doctoral students travelled to Fort McMurray from July 25th to August 16th, 2016. A convenience sample of evacuees were asked to complete an online questionnaire that used a variety of tools to assess symptom severity and make provisional diagnosis. A subset of these participants underwent a standardized clinical interview that merged another three standardized diagnostic instruments.

The clinical interview assessed PTSD, as well as many other disorders including; insomnia, depression, panic, agoraphobia, generalized anxiety, social phobia and obsessive-compulsive disorders, as well as drug and alcohol use disorders.

Preliminary Findings

During data analysis, correlations between variables were examined to document factors associated with the severity of PTSD symptoms based on gender, age and other sociodemographic characteristics. The online questionnaire received 379 respondents, and 55 of those participated in the clinical interview. Results from the online survey showed roughly 60% of the participants 3 months after the fire, suffered from significant post-traumatic stress, with the most reported symptoms being repeated disturbing memories, feeling upset when reminded of the stressful experience, and trouble falling or staying asleep. Results showed overall high severity of depressive symptoms, insomnia and post-traumatic sleep disturbances, as well as poor sleep quality. PTSD symptom severity was negatively correlated with age, showing to be more severe in younger people.

Conclusion

Results from the online questionnaire suggests elevated rates of clinically significant symptoms of major depressive disorder (one in three respondents), somatoform, anxiety and panic disorders, alcohol abuse and binge eating as a result of the Fort McMurray wildfire event. Respondents reported overall high severity of depressive symptoms, insomnia symptoms and post-traumatic sleep disturbances, as well as poor sleep quality. A follow-up of the Fort McMurray community will be needed to assess the long-term psychological impacts identified in this study.