



UNDERSTANDING EVACUATION AND DISPLACEMENT FROM CLIMATE CHANGE-INDUCED DISASTERS:

THE 2024 JASPER WILDFIRES

A research project by Kate
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INTRODUCTION

We are witnessing long term shifts in global temperature and weather patterns as a result of anthropogenic climate change and in 2023 the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) confirmed that this is leading to more frequent and extreme disasters such as; cyclones, droughts, floods and wildfires¹. Consequently, we are also seeing an increase, and can expect to continue to do so, in the number of individuals impacted by these disaster events through evacuation and displacement. While disaster-induced displacement is not a new concern, increases in frequency and intensity due to climate change highlight the need for renewed study of how we mitigate, prevent and respond to these disasters. This research paper, therefore, looks to explore how we should approach these climate change induced disaster events given the devastating impact that displacement can have on communities.

To gain deeper insight into how we should mitigate, prevent and respond to disasters it is important to understand the circumstances that lead to and the

Mitigation, Prevention, Response

Mitigation - 'the lessening or minimising of the adverse impacts of a hazardous event.'²

Prevention - 'activities and measures to avoid existing and new disaster risks.'³

Response - 'actions taken directly before, during or immediately after a disaster in order to save lives, reduce health impacts, ensure public safety and meet the basic subsistence needs of the people affected.'⁴



impact of recent climate change-induced disasters. Therefore, research into disaster events offers an opportunity to gain valuable data that can help inform policy going forward. Therefore, this paper will contribute to this research through an examination of wildfires in Canada, given their growing frequency and intensity in the country in recent years. Specifically, the research will focus on the wildfires that impacted Jasper, Alberta, in July 2024.

This research paper will begin by providing a brief introduction to the research, where my methodology and limitations will then be considered. Next, the paper will present data on the extent of wildfires in Canada, highlighting the upward trend in area burned in recent years, and address the relationship between wildfire and internal displacement in Canada. After there will be a discussion on the importance of narrative research and an introduction to the case study – the 2024 Jasper wildfires. Finally, my findings from my interviews with individuals displaced from the 2024 Jasper wildfires will be presented, and this will lead on to a discussion around suggestions for improvement to mitigation, prevention and response in the face of an increase in displacement from climate change-induced disasters, drawing from my own research as well as a range of secondary literature.

RESEARCH

Every individual that is impacted by a disaster event has a different experience and they are the true experts. By listening to and understanding their experiences we can make informed decisions on how to better prepare and respond to these events. A decision was therefore made to conduct narrative research of the 2024 Jasper wildfires asking the question 'how can lived experiences inform our understanding of evacuation and displacement from climate change-induced disasters and how can we improve mitigation, prevention and response?'

1. Methodology and Limitations

Over the 10 weeks that the research project took place, the researcher conducted secondary research looking at data on wildfires and internal displacement in Canada presented below as well as interviewed individuals that had been evacuated and displaced by wildfire in Jasper, Canada in July 2024. The interviews were semi-structured with the aim of collecting individual experiences of evacuation and displacement. The researcher was interested in understanding the evacuation phase itself, as well as the weeks and months that followed. In doing so, the researcher began with a broad opening question asking them to share their experience of the events of the Jasper wildfire.

The researcher then prompted based on any themes that arose that could be expanded upon as well as some key themes that commonly arise during evacuations and displacement such as what support was received. The researcher then completed a thematic analysis of the interviews to establish recurring topics for further discussion and analysis.

Participants were identified through a variety of methods, including leveraging existing networks, online community outreach, and participant referrals. All participants were adults. The interviews took place online, were recorded and transcribed and lasted between 20 and 60 minutes. Due to time and location constraints of the research project, the sample size of the interviewees was small, at just 4 individuals. With the researcher based in another country from the research focus, this prevented the researcher from utilising methods such as posters and outreach within the community. However, given the emphasis on individual narratives and experiences, the goal was quality over quantity, and despite the small sample size the researcher was able to gain useful insights supported by a range of secondary data sources.



367 ha of forest
across
Canada⁶



Over $\frac{1}{3}$ of Canada's
population live in or
close to forests⁷



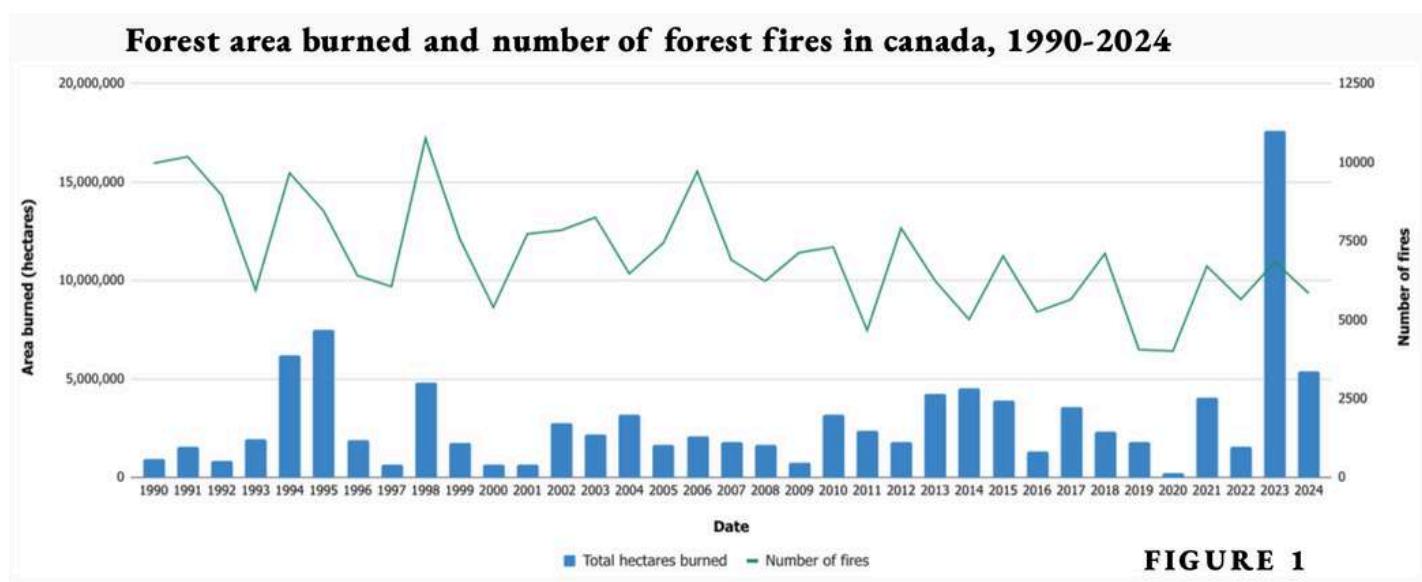
An average of \$1
billion is spent
annually on fire
management⁸

2. Wildfires in Canada

Wildfires are a natural phenomenon and fundamental to the life cycle of forest ecosystems⁵. However, wildfires have become more frequent and intense in recent years, and this is thought to be the result of a combination of two key factors; decades of wildfire suppression policies and anthropogenic climate change^{9,10}. Wildfire suppression policies aim to contain and extinguish wildfires when they occur; however, research has found that this can lead to fuel accumulation as flammable biomass builds up, resulting in more severe wildfires at a later date^{11,12}. As for climate change, a study by Burton et al.¹³ found that it increased global burned area by 15.8% between 2003 and 2019, and scientists are predicting that this increase in area burned will continue over the next few decades as climate change continues to progress^{14,15}.

In 2023, Canada experienced its worst wildfire season in decades with over 15 million hectares (ha) of area burned, as seen in Figure 1¹⁶. While 2024 did not see anywhere near as many hectares of area burned as 2023, it was still the second-worst season since 1995¹⁷. However, as of July 2nd, the 2025 wildfire season has already reported 2672 fires and over 4 million ha of area burned putting it on track to become the second worst season in decades¹⁸.

With over one third of Canada's population living in or close to forests¹⁹, the increase in severity of wildfires in Canada is therefore having a direct impact on the number of individuals facing evacuation and displacement.



3. INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT

According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, internal displacement refers to 'the forced movement of people within the country in which they live' and internally displaced people (IDPs) are those living in protracted displacement unable to return home²⁰.

With 2023 having been the worst wildfire season on record, the season also saw the highest number of internal displacements from wildfire in Canadian history at 185,000²¹. Most displacements due to wildfire in Canada occur as a result of evacuations that can last anywhere from 1 day to indefinitely. While internal displacements in Canada do often result in individuals eventually being able to return to their homes once the risk has diminished enough for it to be safe to do so, a small number of these internal displacements result in IDPs. At the end of 2023, 680 people were IDPs living in protracted displacement and while the 2024 wildfire season saw nearly a quarter of the internal displacements of the year before, the number of IDPs at the end of the year was significantly higher at 2000²².

It is also important to note that Indigenous peoples are disproportionately impacted by wildfire and while they 'make up less than five percent of the Canadian population, one-third of wildfire-based evacuations in Canada involved Indigenous communities'²³. This is due to nearly one million Indigenous peoples living in or close to forested areas²⁴, as well as 'pre-existing health and social inequities, limited access to emergency services, and the ongoing effects of colonialism and structural racism'²⁵.

4. NARRATIVE RESEARCH

Narrative research is a qualitative research approach aimed at developing understanding through stories and experiences. 'Narrative research, sometimes also called narrative inquiry, involves working with narrative materials of various kinds' such as interviews, digital stories, diary entries etc²⁶. The analysis of narrative experiences gives insight into the 'subjectivity of the actor, with attendant wishes, conflicts, goals, opinions, emotions, worldviews, and morals.'²⁷ While narrative research is considered to be relatively broad, with researchers tending towards a variety of approaches and methods of analysis, and not always 'generalisable to populations'²⁸, it has benefits that other research methods cannot offer. Narratives can 'show us little-known phenomena, tell us about lives, demonstrate cognitive and emotional realities and interrelate with social and cultural worlds.'²⁹. There are four frameworks of narrative analysis that can be applied to research: structural, functional, thematic, and dialogic/performance. For this study,

emphasis will be placed on structural and thematic analysis, with the former involving examination of characteristics of a story/experience and the latter identifying what motifs are present³⁰.

When it comes to the study of disasters and displacement, narrative research can be critical to understanding how these events impact individuals and communities. Narratives help 'generate understanding of how individuals make sense of the disaster experience itself, along with its aftermath.'³¹ Previous social research conducted by researchers in Canada found that wildfire affects everyone differently and that people's varying intersecting identities can result in diverse experiences of disaster and displacement³². Disaster risk reduction research has long been a technical field, but it is necessary to place individuals at the centre of research if we are to better prevent, mitigate and respond to events in a way that positively impacts the individuals themselves. With researchers now finding that narrative inquiry can be useful to inform policymakers to make better decisions in disaster risk reduction and response^{33,34}, this research will therefore look to add to this field, applying narrative research to an instance of disaster-induced displacement.

5. THE 2024 JASPER WILDFIRES

On the evening of July 22nd, 2024, Parks Canada received reports of multiple fires having broken out, one to the north of the town of Jasper at the transfer station and three to the south of the town that would very quickly merge into one big fire³⁵. Within just hours of the first reports of fire, Parks Canada and the municipality of Jasper declared an evacuation order for the entire town and shortly thereafter for the whole of Jasper National Park³⁶. At the height of the tourist season, this evacuation order led to over 20,000 locals and tourists having to leave the town mostly via just one highway to the west as the other two highways out of town were compromised by wildfire³⁷. Evacuated individuals, having travelled west across the border into British Columbia, initially received assistance at evacuation centres set up in Valemount before being directed back into Alberta to reception centres in Calgary and Grand Prairie once the magnitude of the wildfires became clear³⁸. In the following days and weeks, the wildfire burned through over 30,000 ha of land despite the efforts of wildfire crews³⁹. By the 24th of July, the wildfire south of Jasper reached the townsite resulting in 358 of 1113 structures in Jasper suffering damage⁴⁰. On August 16th, 2024, the evacuation order was lifted, and residents were finally allowed to return to town, however, many did not have homes to return to⁴¹.



6. KEY FINDINGS

When sharing their experiences of evacuation and displacement during and after the 2024 Jasper wildfire, individuals were given the opportunity to share their story. In doing so, they presented the events and experiences that were most significant to them as well as shared their feelings about some key themes of evacuation and displacement. I have categorised elements of their experiences into four areas for discussion below: communication, mental health, support and services, and prevention and preparedness.

6.1 Communication

Interviewees presented varying experiences of communication during their evacuation and displacement experience. One interviewee felt that there was a significant lack of information and updates shared by government agencies. They expressed that waiting for information and updates was a key source of their anxiety in the initial weeks of the evacuation. Not knowing what impact the fire had had on the town and whether their property and belongings were unharmed resulted in significant stress and anxiety.

They indicated that they just wanted some news, whether positive or negative, to no longer be living in a state of uncertainty. Other interviewees also expressed that uncertainty around what impact the wildfire had had on the town and their homes impacted their mental health. However, there was also recognition that wildfires lead to constantly changing and evolving situations making it complicated to provide accurate information. Further to this though, some interviewees mentioned that due to the delayed updates from government agencies who were waiting for confirmation before sharing any information this gave way to information sharing on social media and misinformation with one interviewee sharing their experience of receiving miscommunication from varying sources.

Those that had more positive reflections on the communication and information they received during their evacuation and displacement did assign a significant amount of credit for this with their employers. Two interviewees mentioned weekly calls with their employer to keep them updated about the situation and any news and information they were able to share. However, another interviewee who also received regular communication from their employer also found that this communication while useful and positive, did lend them to believe that their employment situation was more secure than it eventually turned out to be.

“
I JUST WANT TO KNOW SO I'M OUT OF THIS HAMSTER WHEEL OF HOPE AND THEN NO HOPE AND BACK AND FORTH.”

(INTERVIEWEE 1)

6.2 Mental Health

Further to communication or lack thereof impacting some individual's' mental health, the process of being evacuated and then living in displacement also led to some interviewees reporting impacts to their mental health. One interviewee discussed the hardship of living in hotels while displaced and finding themselves idle. Unable to go to work, this individual mentioned wishing they had access to their art supplies which is something that they enjoy and do regularly. Others opted to travel beyond Calgary or Grand Prairie to stay with family or friends during their displacement, suggesting a desire for familiarity and comfort. Beyond the initial weeks and months of displacement from Jasper, when sharing the fact that they would not be returning to Jasper anytime soon, one interviewee interviewee mentioned that they felt that they had lost their home, even if they had not physically lost their belongings or property.

Jasper has a unique community, in that while there are a lot of individuals that were born and raised in town, there is a significant number of residents who complete seasonal work, sometimes staying for one or two summers or choosing to settle longer term. With housing in the town often tied to employment, some individuals, while they did not lose their home to the fire, were unable to return for employment reasons. One interviewee mentioned that in having lost their job due to the fire, they also lost their home and community and the ability to grieve this loss with the people they used to live and work with. This raises the question of what home is, and how every individual's understanding and interpretation of home is different. In fact, one individual who has shared their story of displacement from the wildfires the Jasper wildfires online, also mentioned the fact that they don't feel like they can go back to Jasper yet not only because they lost their property but because 'home is where the heart is' and 'where do you go when your heart is broken?'⁴²

“

I DID NOT LOSE MY BELONGINGS BUT I LOST MY HOME...I
LOST [MY] COMMUNITY' (INTERVIEWEE 2)

“

“
‘BUT IF HOME IS WHERE THE
HEART IS, WHERE DO YOU GO
WHEN YOUR HEART IS
BROKEN?’ (STEPHEN NELSON)⁴³

6.3 Support and services

Mental health support was discussed by some of the interviewees as being hard to access. One interviewee mentioned waiting months for an appointment and only receiving one 45-minute session. They felt that they would have benefitted from access to mental health support much earlier on in the initial stages of their evacuation and displacement. They also found that services, including mental health support, were often based in the townsite of Jasper itself once individuals were able to return. However, if an individual had lost their home due to the wildfires, it was very unlikely that they would be in Jasper at this point and able to access services.

Two interviewees also brought up the complex and bureaucratic systems in place to access services that meant that they struggled to obtain necessary support. They were required to provide ID and proof of residency, which while understandable, can be hard to provide if you have lost your belongings to fire or are a seasonal worker. One interviewee also mentioned that in choosing to leave the hotel they had initially been placed at to visit family elsewhere in Canada, upon their return they then lost access to this support. They then instead were able to get support from their employer for a place to stay. Multiple interviewees mentioned the support that they received from their employers and how this had a positive impact on their experience of displacement, including help with places to stay and finances.

Another thing to note is that most interviewees mentioned having a relatively positive experience from a financial perspective which helped reduce their stress during their displacement.

6.4 Prevention and Preparedness

When interviewees were asked what they feel should be done to prevent wildfire events like the one in Jasper in 2024, multiple interviewees mentioned the need for more controlled burns and management of dead trees and vegetation. They believed that more could have been done to remove the dead trees and vegetation in and around the Jasper townsite to prevent the scale and impact of the wildfire. There was mention of the dead trees in the National Park being the result of an outbreak of the mountain pine beetle. One interviewee also reflected on the impact of wildfire resilient building and hearing that some properties faced significantly less damage than others due to use of fire- and heat-resistant building materials.

Interviewees also mentioned that they never expected a wildfire of the magnitude that occurred to ever have happened in Jasper. While interviewees discussed the fact that while they had previously experienced wildfire in some way, whether that be smoke in the summer or experiencing the wildfire that occurred outside town in 2022 or seeing the impact of the 2016 Fort McMurray wildfire, they never expected a wildfire to ever impact their home. This same sentiment was shared by two individuals that shared their experiences of the Jasper wildfire with CTV news with one individual saying that when evacuating town they weren't 'thinking of losing town, or that [they were] going to lose [their] stuff'⁴⁴. One interviewee even brought up that the year prior there had been discussion of creating an action plan at their workplace but that it was never communicated to the staff any further. They suggested that action plans needed to become a normalised thing going forward, especially for those living in or near forests.

“

‘IT'S NOT GOING TO HAPPEN TO US. IT'S NEVER GOING TO HAPPEN TO THIS TOWN. SURE ENOUGH, IT DID.’

(INTERVIEWEE 2)

“

DISCUSSION

The findings above give us insight into how individuals experienced the 2024 Jasper wildfire from their initial evacuation to their displacement. These insights have guided the following discussion surrounding suggestions for mitigation, prevention and response to climate change-induced disasters and displacement. The first section will make suggestions for mitigation and prevention of wildfire disasters in Canada, with these two approaches having been merged due to many of the propositions intersecting and offering solutions to both. The second section will then make suggestions for improving response to wildfire disasters in Canada. The final section will then discuss the broader implications for policy aimed at addressing the impacts of climate change-induced disasters globally.

1. MITIGATION AND PREVENTION

The research above found that people in Jasper did not expect an event like the 2024 wildfire to ever affect them and that while they are aware of wildfires and the impacts that they can have, they do not equate this with risk to themselves. When it comes to public risk awareness regarding all weather disasters, a 2021 survey by Public Safety Canada (PSC) found that 74% of Canadians believe they live in low or moderate risk areas, 21% didn't know about the specific levels of risk, 9% have never thought about it, and just 4% of Canadians believed that they lived in a high risk area⁴⁵. In 2023, PSC also reported that in relation to wildfire risk, 'there remain gaps in public awareness.'⁴⁶ Therefore, one necessary step to mitigate the impacts of wildfire disasters and displacement, is ensuring that there is an increase in awareness and education of the risks and potential impacts of wildfire across communities in Canada

As previously mentioned, climate change is causing an increase in frequency and intensity in wildfire, therefore the education and awareness piece needs to also ensure that this is a part of the conversation. By denying and downplaying the impacts of climate change on wildfire, governments risk communities not taking the risks seriously enough. The current level of education and communication is not urgent enough to ensure that everyone is aware that 'no one is immune from climate change's growing impacts' and that we need to act now to secure our futures⁴⁷. While the government of Canada have been working to raise awareness of the impacts and risks of wildfires through its FireSmart program, there is still a need for the program to be adapted to better align with the needs of individual communities⁴⁸.

However, with the recent announcement of a total investment of \$104 million to the Resilient Communities through FireSmart program there is hope that this will help to improve awareness and education of the impacts of wildfires to better mitigate going forward⁴⁹.

In addition to increased education and awareness to improve prevention and mitigation of disaster risk, as mentioned above by one interviewee, there needs to be greater focus on building and adapting properties so that they are wildfire resilient. To end the disaster recovery cycle, greater focus needs to be placed on building resilience through prevention and mitigation⁵⁰. Research by the Canadian Climate Institute has found that for every dollar invested in adaptation measures, this 'can yield to up to \$15 in avoided costs and economic benefits.⁵¹' We have seen in numerous cases including since the wildfire last summer in Jasper, that efforts to rebuild after a wildfire event focus on "building back better" through wildfire resistant building practices and technology⁵². However, what we have yet to see enough of, is funding available to individuals and communities to make the adaptations to their homes now, before disaster strikes. Therefore, we need to see an increase in funding allocated to grants and subsidies that enable Canadians at risk of wildfire to make adequate changes to their homes to prevent and mitigate wildfire disasters, leaving them displaced long-term.

Finally, multiple interviewees felt that there was a need for better vegetation management and controlled burns to help mitigate and prevent wildfire disaster events. As mentioned above, wildfire is essential to the life cycle of forests and wildfire suppression policies in the past have been a contributing factor to the increased frequency and intensity of wildfire events. Hoffman et al refer to this as the 'double fire paradox' - the consequence of attempting to exclude fire is increasing the occurrence of extreme wildfires⁵³. And while we have begun to see a movement away from suppression policies, towards the use of prescribed burns there is still a failure to acknowledge that previous colonial practices and fire exclusion legislation have also contributed to this problem.

Indigenous communities have been using fire for centuries to 'maintain desirable, diverse and resilient ecosystems and to achieve cultural objectives that have ecological benefits.⁵⁴' However, historical fire exclusion legislation outlawed cultural burning and to this day this has resulted in a loss of traditional knowledge and the use of cultural burning⁵⁵. Therefore, significant barriers to reviving indigenous fire stewardship need to be removed to enable indigenous communities to be meaningfully engaged in wildfire management, preventing and mitigating the risk of wildfire disaster events⁵⁶. Indigenous communities have the knowledge and expertise, and rather than see this appropriated by government agencies, we need to support communities to lead the reinstatement of fire stewardship practices⁵⁷.

Earlier this year, Natural Resources Canada granted the Kainai Nation in Alberta \$500,000 to establish a fire guardians program⁵⁸. The first of its kind, the program will bring back cultural burning as a vital fire management practice in the area, reducing the risk of disastrous wildfire events⁵⁹. Going forward, we need to see more funding and support for local indigenous led fire guardian initiatives across the country to prevent and mitigate wildfire evacuation and displacement.

2. RESPONSE

With interviewees above sharing their concerns about the lack of communication and information in the initial days and weeks of their evacuation and how it led to uncertainty and misinformation, this is an area of disaster response that needs more attention to reduce the impacts evacuation and displacement has on communities. Updates, of course, can only be provided to communities once the necessary information has been confirmed and disaster events such as wildfires do complicate this. However, agencies should ensure that they are providing updates as regularly as possible to ease uncertainty and tackle misinformation, especially in light of social media. One other suggestion that may help to improve communication and prevent misinformation is ensuring that the information is as localised as possible. If information can come from community leaders and organisations it is more likely to be trusted and can help provide the reassurance individuals living with uncertainty need. In response to the recent wildfires this year in Manitoba, the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs called for the establishment of a command centre that included 'direct representation from affected First Nations leadership'⁶⁰. This is because, individuals from the affected community are in the best position to ensure that their communities receive the necessary information and support.

When it comes to the support that individuals receive in their immediate evacuation through to their indefinite displacement, there is a need to ensure that this support is robust to prevent as little negative social and mental impacts as possible. Interviewees above mentioned the need for better mental health provisions and shared how important their community and familiarity were to them during their evacuation and displacement. This therefore suggests that there is generally a need for better mental health provisions. Beyond this, researchers have previously found that 'top-down, command-and-control approaches to emergency management are often very effective in getting people out of immediate harm's way'⁶¹ but can lead to family and community fragmentation^{62,63}. This suggests a need for more community-centred approaches that prioritise social well being with efforts made to provide evacuees with as much normalcy as possible. One locally led initiative that was established in 2015 was the 'Rez Cross' - a culturally appropriate evacuation centre set up by Beardy's and Okemasis First

Nation in Saskatchewan⁶⁴. More recently, the Missanabie Cree First Nation have established an emergency operations centre to support fellow First Nations communities given that they are disproportionately impacted by disaster events⁶⁵. They have embedded 'culturally informed programming' into their assistance, offering mental health support as well as various recreational activities⁶⁶.

These community led centres are designed to offered those facing displacement from disasters as much familiarity and support as possible in times of crisis. In the future, there is hope that more locally led evacuation initiatives will emerge to enable the provision of support to prioritise social and mental health.



3. IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

1. There needs to be universal recognition and understanding that climate change is causing increasingly frequent and intense hazards, leading to the potential for more disasters and displacement.
2. There needs to be an increase in funding to allow for more community-led education and awareness campaigns to ensure communities recognise the risks they may face and have the tools they need to mitigate this risk.
3. There needs to be recognition that every community is unique and that efforts to mitigate, prevent and respond to disasters need to be adequately tailored to every situation.
4. There needs to be an increase in social research to better understand and account for the social impacts of disasters on individuals and communities, with the use of intersectional frameworks to recognise how intersecting identities can influence how people respond to disaster and displacement.
5. There needs to be continued efforts to ensure that policies to mitigate, prevent and respond to disasters and displacement are community-led to empower communities to lead the way in their own path to resilience.
6. There needs to be an increase in funding for mitigation and prevention, to enable at risk communities to establish infrastructure and community planning to reduce their vulnerability to disaster and displacement.

CONCLUSION

Climate change is leading to more frequent and intense disasters, which in turn are responsible for the ever-greater number of individuals impacted by evacuation and displacement. We must adapt; revisiting how we prevent, mitigate and respond to disasters to ensure that we minimise the impact on communities across the globe. Every individual's experience of evacuation and displacement is different and in order to improve disaster risk reduction we must continue to learn from the lived experiences of those that have been affected. The research in this paper aimed to better understand lived experiences of evacuation and displacement from climate change-induced disasters to make suggestions for improvements to prevention, mitigation and response. While the situation in Jasper was unique, the lessons learned can be applied to disaster risk reduction as we continue to navigate the future of evacuation and displacement as climate change continues to present an uncertain future for communities.

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