



## Social Workers and Disaster Management: An Aotearoa New Zealand Perspective

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## **Social workers and disaster management: An Aotearoa New Zealand perspective**

### **Abstract**

In many parts of the world, social workers have long supported disaster responses although in Aotearoa New Zealand social work is not generally considered an essential component of disaster management. Promoting the development of safer, less vulnerable communities, is however a key activity for both social work and disaster management. The recent shift from a traditional focus on hazards to vulnerability and resilience consolidates the alignment and importance of social work within this field. This article reports the results of the first known survey of registered social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand and their involvement in disaster events. Additionally, the article highlights the perspectives of six disaster management professionals on the role of social workers in disaster management. The findings offer examples of social workers' engagement in disaster work, the variable understanding of social work by disaster management personnel, and the importance of social work maintaining a positive public profile. Implications for future social work practice and education internationally as well as disaster management policy and practice are outlined.

### **Key words**

Aotearoa New Zealand, disaster, education, emergency management, social work

## **Social work in Aotearoa New Zealand**

In Aotearoa New Zealand, social workers are employed across a wide range of fields and practice contexts including government, non-government, private and Iwi or Māori organisations (Hay, Dale and Cooper, 2016). There are over 10000 registered social workers with this number expected to rise with the recent shift to mandatory registration following the implementation of the Social Workers Registration Legislation Act 2019. Eighteen higher education institutions (HEIs) offer social work qualifications to more than 3,000 students annually (SWRB, 2018). The curriculum of the qualifying programmes is generic, preparing graduates to engage with people across the lifespan and within multiple fields of practice. Anecdotally, some HEIs have strengthened their curriculum following recent disaster events by incorporating aspects of disaster management, but this appears to be inconsistent across qualifying programmes. Many graduates will, however, become employed in organisations that are tasked as first responders to a disaster event. Furthermore, social workers in other agencies may also contribute to disaster response and recovery efforts. These factors suggest that greater attention should be given to graduate preparedness for such occurrences.

## **Disaster management**

Although a small country of approximately 5,000,000 people, Aotearoa New Zealand has experienced several natural and human-made disasters in the past two decades that have had considerable negative impact on many individuals, families and communities. The Canterbury earthquakes in 2010 and 2011 were the most significant, with the 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2011 quake resulting in 165 deaths, multiple injuries and widespread damage to buildings, roads and telecommunication systems. In 2016, another major earthquake in North

Canterbury caused two deaths and extensive damage to infrastructure. The affected area was cut off from the rest of the country for several weeks, contributing to a loss of income and negative health and wellbeing impacts on many local people (Fang *et al.*, 2020). Other earthquakes, several flooding events, and a major oil spill have also created upheaval in people's lives, financially and psychologically.

The National Emergency Management Agency is the government department tasked with leading and coordinating disaster management planning, response and recovery efforts in Aotearoa New Zealand. Partnering with local authorities, local civil defence groups are responsible for managing emergencies and employ officers to coordinate and liaise with first response organisations. This network of responders includes hospitals, Ministry for Children Oranga Tamariki, non-government organisations such as the Salvation Army, as well as the Defence Force and Red Cross. The work of civil defence groups is underpinned by the international framework of reduction, readiness, response and recovery (Civil Defence, 2015). Briefly, reduction includes identifying and analysing risks created by hazards and limiting or eliminating any negative impacts from these risks. Readiness refers to the development of appropriate operational systems prior to a disaster event. The actions taken immediately following an emergency event fall under the response phase and recovery includes any efforts in the short-, medium-, and long-term that enable regeneration of the affected community (<https://www.civildefence.govt.nz/cdem-sector/the-4rs/>). The purpose of this framework is to reduce the capacity of a community's vulnerability to hazards, ensure effective responses following an event, and support recovery and renewal processes. Historically, the disaster management discourse has been shaped by the physical sciences, with an emphasis on hazard management and environmental factors (Alston *et al.*, 2019).

Through this discourse, vulnerability has most commonly been related to the environmental ecosystem and its susceptibility to factors such as climate change or erosion. By incorporating social vulnerability into an analysis, this concept brings greater attention to the unequal risks faced by different groups in society (Alston *et al.*, 2019). Similarly, the expansion of disaster resilience to include social systems and consideration of the capacity of individuals and communities to adapt allows an analysis of power differentials, as well as social, cultural and political factors (Alston *et al.*, 2019; Harms and Alston, 2018; Tiong Tan and Yuen, 2013). Expanding the conceptualisation of these concepts increases awareness of inequalities and social impacts, and places disaster management more firmly in the realm of social work practice (Gillespie and Danso, 2010; Hay, 2019; Molyneaux *et al.*, 2020).

## **Social work and disaster management**

The Global Agenda for Social Work underpins the social work profession internationally and recognises that inequalities and unsustainable environments affect people's wellbeing (IASSW, ICSW and IFSW, 2014). The impact of inequality on people's wellbeing is heightened following disaster events and given that social workers are frequently engaged with the most vulnerable people in society, it follows that they can, and should, have a pivotal role in response and recovery efforts (Harms and Alston, 2018; Mathbor, 2007; Rapeli, 2018; Whitmore and Wilson, 2005). Social workers have had an active and effective involvement in disaster management across many countries including China, Finland, Australia and the US (Ku and Dominelli, 2018; Harms and Alston, 2018; Hawkins and Maurer, 2010; Huang *et al.*, 2011; Rapeli, 2018; Tiong Tan and Yuen, 2013). This involvement is less visible in Aotearoa New Zealand (Hay and Pascoe, 2018, 2019).

Social workers are trained in assessment and intervention methods that can be applied cross-culturally with diverse individuals, families, groups, and communities (Ow, 2019). They understand the importance of ecosystems and enabling connections at a micro and macro level to reduce isolation, loneliness, and fear (Sanders and Munford, 2019). Furthermore, their critical analysis contributes to understandings of the socio-political nexus as well as micro-level issues impacting individuals, families, and communities (Lay and McGuire, 2010). The value of social workers also resides in their commitment to ethical practice and ability to build trusting relationships between people and organisations, capabilities which are essential when enabling cooperation, especially following a disaster (Rapeli, 2018; Vachette *et al.*, 2017). These core social work skills are transferable across fields of practice and are extremely relevant in post-disaster environments (Dominelli, 2014).

The role of social capital and the development of a networked system has been shown to have considerable importance following a disaster and is a relevant conceptual framework for social work practice (Du Plooy *et al.*, 2014; Hawkins and Maurer, 2010; Healy and Hampshire, 2002; Vachette *et al.*, 2017). Social capital refers to networks that enable people to work together to address identified individual or institutional problems (Putnam, 2000). Further, these networks can directly or indirectly produce resources that benefit individuals, families, and communities (Hawkins and Maurer, 2010). Social capital is commonly separated into three areas: bonding networks whereby actors are connected within a common network; bridging networks in which links are made between actors from different but complementary networks; and linking networks which incorporate people from different systems (Vachette *et al.*, 2017). For social workers, bonding may be apparent in their support of interpersonal relationships and attachments after catastrophic events such as Hurricane Katrina (Hawkins and Maurer, 2010; Loeffler *et al.*, 2004). An example of

bridging networks was seen in the establishment of craft groups following earthquakes in Aotearoa New Zealand (Tudor *et al.*, 2015) wherein people connected due to their interest in craft but also because of their shared experience of the earthquakes. Developing linkages between individuals, organisations, media, and government institutions to influence decision-making can also lead to positive outcomes following a disaster event (Du Plooy *et al.*, 2014; Rapeli, 2018). Social workers often advocate on behalf of others, however by focusing on linking networks they can empower people to engage directly with policy or practice decision-makers (Healy and Hampshire, 2002). Following a disaster, social workers may have opportunities to organise service user-led meetings with local and government officials, politicians and financial institutions or encourage community voices in future planning activities (Du Plooy *et al.*, 2014; Mathbor, 2007).

While social workers have a long history of supporting disaster responses, especially internationally, in Aotearoa New Zealand they have not generally been recognised as an essential contributor to disaster management (Hay and Pascoe, 2018). As a professional discipline with a primary focus on enabling the well-being of individuals, families, groups and communities, social workers are ideally situated to be significant actors (Ellis *et al.*, 2018; Harms and Alston, 2018). The limited, and at times, distorted understanding of what social workers do, we believe has potentially affected opportunities for social workers to be fully engaged in the disaster management field. Responsibility for this lies both with disaster management professionals and social workers themselves. Establishing an understanding of how disaster management professionals perceive social workers as well as learning how social workers have already contributed to this important work may increase future utility and effectiveness of social workers in this domain. Whilst the data from this research has

focused on the Aotearoa New Zealand context, the results and implications have currency for other countries.

## **Methods**

The authors are engaged in social work education and research and have a particular interest in the efficacy of curriculum content for preparing social workers for diverse practice. Stimulated by researcher positionality and the environment described above, the authors sought to examine different stakeholder perspectives on social workers' engagement in disaster management and how they are perceived in this context.

As part of a four-stage project, this article reports on the findings from stage two, interviews with disaster management practitioners, and stage three, a survey of registered social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand. The aim of stage two was to:

Examine the perspectives of people employed by emergency management organisations on the role of social work practice and social workers in specific instances of emergency response in New Zealand in the past 10 years.

The research question for stage three was: How have registered social workers been involved in disaster management in their professional role in Aotearoa New Zealand?

Drawing upon a pragmatic epistemology, the research aim and question was of central importance, and methods were informed by practicality (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). The survey enabled the generation of data efficiently and effectively within the constraints of limited time and funding. Detailed and rich data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with a select number of experts in disaster management. This qualitative data provided "contextualized, in-depth descriptions that allow for increased understanding"



(Lietz and Zayas, 2010, p.189). Combining both qualitative and quantitative methods enabled exploration from different perspectives and thus provided a more complete picture of the topic under consideration (Ritchie and Ormston, 2014).

## **Participants**

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit the interview participants with an inclusion criteria being that they had to currently be working in the disaster management field (Ritchie *et al.*, 2014). Semi-structured interviews were conducted during May 2017 with six practitioners who are employed in roles in which their primary focus is associated with disaster management. The participants worked in government and non-government organisations and all had been active in each of the four stages of disaster management. None of the participants were registered social workers or had completed any qualifications in social work and were not known to the authors. The first author directly approached three organisations identified as being first responders to disasters to seek participation. These organisations agreed to participate and recommended a further three organisations or individuals to approach. These invitations were also met with agreement. One participant became a registered social worker and so their interview data has not been included in this article. In another organisation two practitioners requested being interviewed together. The sample size of six practitioners from five organisations is a limitation of the research however was necessary due to time and funding constraints. Further research with non-social work disaster management practitioners is recommended.

Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or by telephone depending on the location and preference of the participant. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by the second author. Following familiarisation with the data, it was then analysed

thematically, initially driven by the interview questions (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Coding of the transcripts, following The Framework Method, allowed key themes to emerge that were categorised in a thematic framework (Spencer *et al.*, 2014). This approach assisted with developing linkages across the data that then enabled initial explanations to be formed, as outlined in the findings below (Spencer *et al.*, 2014). Initial themes mirrored the interview question areas, for example, understanding the social work role, skills and knowledge of social workers and engagement in disaster management.

Drawing on the relevant published literature, themes were identified which informed the first author in designing a survey tool to explore Aotearoa New Zealand social worker's experiences of disaster management. The survey was trialled with a colleague who had experience in survey design and implementation and was familiar with Qualtrics online software. The survey was distributed by the Social Workers Registration Board, the regulatory body for social work in Aotearoa New Zealand in September 2018. Approximately 7500 registered social workers received the survey by email and the survey was open for one month. Sixty-nine responses were received, however, due to incompleteness or not fitting the criteria for participation, a total of fifty-seven full responses were analysed. The small uptake of survey participants is a major limitation and no statistical significance can be applied. The use of descriptive statistics allows for the basic elements in the data to be presented, however, the results only provide a limited picture of the involvement of registered social workers in disaster management in Aotearoa New Zealand.

### **Ethics**

Ethics approval was granted by the Human Ethics Committee at Massey University, New Zealand (reference 4000017401) in 2017 with further approval in 2018 (reference

4000019500). Informed consent and confidentiality were important ethical considerations. Potential interview participants were emailed an information sheet and the interview schedule prior to agreement to participate and the aims of the research as well as their rights were reiterated before their provision of written consent. Identifying information regarding the participants' places of employment has been removed and pseudonyms and the neutral pronoun 'they' is used to ensure confidentiality. Anonymity was guaranteed in the survey and none of the participants are identifiable. The survey included an explanation of the project and use of the generated data.

## **Results**

The results offer insights into Aotearoa New Zealand social workers' engagement in disaster management and disaster management personnel's perspectives on social workers in this field.

### **Survey**

The first part of this section will draw on the survey data and outline which stages of disaster management social workers have been involved in, the types of work they were engaged with, the visibility and utilisation of social workers in disaster management and training considerations.

The participants ranged in age brackets from 20-29 years to 60-69 years with 88% identifying as between 40 and 69 years old. They were employed across a range of workplaces when they were engaged in disaster work.

Table 1. Employing workplaces at the time of the disaster event

Type of workplace	Participants
Non-government organisations	22
District Health Board (hospitals)	16
Ministry for Children Oranga Tamariki	10
Other government, e.g. City Council, Police	6
Iwi/Māori organisations	3
Total	57

### ***Social workers involvement in disaster management***

The survey participants had been professionally involved in a wide range of disaster events, locally and internationally. Many participants signposted their experience related to the Canterbury or Kaikoura earthquakes (2010, 2011 and 2016) with others indicating several flooding events, cyclones, and a significant oil spill. The social workers identified involvement across the four stages of disaster management although a majority were engaged in response and recovery phases (see Table 2). The tasks were wide-ranging including direct client work, planning and policy development, training, research, networking, and debriefing.

Table 2. Tasks related to disaster management stages

Disaster Management Stage	Participation (n=57) (able to respond to more than one area)	Examples of tasks

Risk reduction	12	Health and safety plans; family plans; research; training staff
Readiness	16	Civil Defence planning sessions; preparation of organisation; annual rehearsal; liaising with other organisations about communication channels
Response	39	Direct service user work; provision of emergency supplies; liaising with other organisations; making referrals; Welfare Centre work; psychosocial support; management and coordination of staff; door-to-door wellness checks; advocacy; work at Civil Defence headquarters; protection of properties
Recovery	31	Psychosocial support; relocation of clients; care of service users; managing ongoing casework; facilitating support groups; accessing accommodation; providing counselling; preparing emergency kits; evaluating responses and policies; improving plans and policies; setting up drop-in centres; attending interdisciplinary debriefings

Responding to a list of potential tasks provided in the survey, participants indicated the relevant social work activities they had engaged in relating to disaster management (see Table 3 for the seven highest responses). The activities with the highest involvement all

related to tasks either in the immediate response or long-term recovery stages, reflecting the qualitative responses above.

Table 3. Social work activity in disaster management

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Involvement (n=57) (Able to respond to more than one area)</b>
Advocacy	35
Networking with other agencies	33
Trauma-focused work	30
Case work with new clients	29
Practical aid-related work	27
Work in a welfare or evacuation centre	26
Case work with existing clients	25

Other activities included management of staff; planning and/or policy work; development and/or implementation of new programmes; and community development.

Interestingly, just over half of the participants were engaged in disaster work in the geographical location where they lived and worked, with approximately one third being sent into another area for a finite period. Nearly another third of participants indicated 'Other' and provided a range of reasons for this response including that they were sometimes relocated physically but often as part of a roster, so they moved in and out of the disaster space. Relocation is common in disaster response and recovery, and social workers must be prepared to adapt quickly to new contexts.

***Visibility, utilisation and training of social workers***

The survey participants were emphatic that social workers are not visible enough in the disaster management space (n=37). The remaining participants indicated that social workers had sufficient visibility. Interestingly, 51 of the participants believed that social workers' skills and knowledge could be further utilised in disaster management, suggesting they are currently not used to their full potential. As one participant commented:

Social workers are under-utilised as many people don't know what we do and how we do it.

Another participant, however, suggested social workers are not able to clearly articulate their professional role:

Because social workers struggle to identify their purpose and role from other disciplines, they struggle to identify what they can bring to disaster management.

Concerningly, only just over a third of the participants thought that social workers are adequately trained for disaster-related work. A greater number (n=24) agreed, with the caveat of being prepared to some extent, with a fifth of the participants indicating that social workers are not adequately trained for working in this domain. These numbers closely mirrored those related to the question: Were you well-equipped for disaster work? with approximately one third indicating yes, a fifth indicating no and the remainder ticking 'to some extent'. These results suggest a gap in the current tertiary curriculum and continuing professional development of social workers. That said, several qualitative responses highlighted skills social workers have that can be transferred into disaster management, for example:

They are good at liaison, coordination, communication, networking, putting systems in place, supporting people to help themselves.

### **Qualitative interviews**

The second part of this section focuses on the responses from disaster management personnel about their understanding of what social workers do in their professional role, how social workers can be contributors to disaster management, and possible future involvement in this field of practice.

#### ***What do social workers do?***

The disaster management personnel had limited understanding of what social workers do in their professional role and this knowledge was largely dependent on whether they had previously experienced either personal or professional interaction with social workers. One participant suggested that social workers can connect services with those who may require them, and this resonated with Sam's perspective:

Advocates on behalf of, problem solves, can network with other agencies, and probably has the well-being of the person involved at heart, possibly, rather than just representing the state agency. (Sam)

Alex admitted their view of social workers had been tainted by their previous employment in a law enforcement agency where they and other staff had viewed social workers as doing little apart from "holding hands and hugging." In their current role in a health service they had interacted with many social workers and now recognised their value, although they confessed that, "what they're doing out there is probably a little bit foggy apart from the fact that I know they are working with people."



The participant who seemed most informed worked in a national social service organisation at a managerial level and had liaised with other organisations following the Canterbury earthquakes. This participant was able to name organisations in which social workers are employed and could articulate specific examples of social worker involvement, especially in schools, following the earthquakes. They recognised that social workers can work alongside a range of clients:

... very holistic approach to whatever it was that they were doing and in lots of cases that ended up being actually that they spent more time doing one on one work with the family themselves as opposed to necessarily the child. (Charlie)

They emphasised that social workers are professionally trained and therefore can effectively work with people, especially those who had experienced significant trauma:

... social workers being ready, able to hit the ground, already had all those professional checks and expected behaviours in place that made them ideally placed for dealing with anybody, pretty much, after that sort of traumatic event. (Charlie)

When questioned further, Charlie was less specific about what the social workers had actually done and assumed they were involved with the outreach and door knocking teams as well as working with their own clients:

Don't ask me, I don't know quite what they did in terms of hands on the ground.

The other participants, in contrast, knew less about social workers' activity following the earthquakes as illustrated in a defence staff comment:

I didn't see social workers down there [Christchurch] ... I never really saw them, so I think their profile is quite low. I mean I know they existed ... you saw the Red Cross, you saw a lot of media, but you just didn't see ... the social workers. (Jamie)

Surprisingly, the participants from the government disaster management organisation that holds a welfare function were very vague about what social workers do and where they might be employed. Although they thought the Salvation Army might have social workers (which they do), they seemed very confused about Ministry for Children Oranga Tamariki which is a legislated first responder following a disaster event. Their limited understanding was apparent:

And we're all social workers to a degree in some role you know, when we respond to it. (River)

This vagueness was reiterated by a further comment: "when it comes to understanding what they actually do...I probably have no idea." (River)

Even with a reasonably limited understanding of what social workers had done following the earthquakes, there was a general sense that social work skills could be of considerable value in disaster management. These skills included being experienced at working alongside people who are distressed, effective communication, empathy and being "comfortable with an austere environment." (Jamie)

### ***How could social workers further contribute?***

The participants focused primarily on response and recovery efforts in terms of social worker involvement in disaster management. This perhaps emphasises the limited

understanding of social work training and practice which includes policy development and capacity building of individuals and communities.

Alex was pragmatic, recognising that having more trained people assisting after a disaster should be beneficial:

... and I would certainly see that all of those people that are in that social network, getting involved earlier and quicker to try and ease the pain of those who've been through some sort of disaster... we don't have a huge army of civil defence workers.

Social worker engagement in the immediate aftermath of a disaster event was discussed by several participants who gave examples of how they imagined social workers could be of value. This included doing referrals, looking after unaccompanied minors, linking families, supporting children in Child Friendly spaces, and door-knocking with outreach teams. Social workers could also be part of the welfare/evacuation centre work:

There should be social workers at the collection centre providing support that they need. That's where everyone comes to. I think it's a definite must and definite need.

(Jamie)

Interestingly, it was the government organisation again that seemed to have little appreciation of the wide-ranging skills of social workers:

... make sure they are comfortable, give them [people in welfare centres] cuddles when they need it, give them cups of teas when they need it, feed them, making sure that they are safe ... just give them a cup of tea and make sure that the immediate needs are catered for. ... the specialists then come in further on down the track if required ... (River)

Continuing with their usual role and working alongside current clients or communities was also viewed as critical:

... that immediate stage after a disaster, I guess that their role is to do their regular job and therefore to check on all their existing clients in whatever way they can do that. And to be able to provide extra support or referrals to somewhere else if that's needed. (Charlie)

Maintaining a presence in the mid- to long-term disaster management phases was considered important, especially when other disaster management personnel were leaving the location. While often being regarded as heroes, Jamie noted that these external first responders had the more straightforward task of returning to jobs and families that had not been disrupted by the disaster event. They recognised that significant stressors remain on those staying behind and therefore the need for social work support can increase:

So I see it at that point where their stress levels rise so, I suppose it's whether social workers are ready to go in and capture those issues. I have heard stories of increase in suicide, increase of drug use, increase of alcohol abuse ... because of the stressors that are being placed on people. (Jamie)

Similarly, Sam noted the ongoing need for social work interventions:

If your question is, do I think there is a useful role? Yes, there is. Maybe not in the first 6 hours; maybe, maybe not. Definitely after day one. And depending on the incident, in the real tail-on time frames. And not just in what you might call the disaster period, but for some time afterwards. (Sam)

Charlie had seen the impacts of disaster events on individuals and families and recommended social workers be deliberately involved in the risk reduction and planning stage of the disaster management cycle as this may assist with responses following future disaster events:

If you think of a disaster cycle starting with the disaster and then going response, recovery and then to complete that circle you might want to look at preparedness, mitigation, or call it resilience if you like. I could potentially see a role for social workers there and working with families around, if a family is in a good space, well connected to their local community, then they're in a much better space for dealing with a disaster ... strengthening them to deal with whatever other disaster might come along later. (Charlie)

There are additional challenges for professionals who experienced a disaster event to continue working in that location, especially if they had been negatively impacted. For this reason, Jamie recommended that both local and external social workers could add value following a disaster event:

I suppose for a social worker who's local, they are impacted by it as well, so they've got issues of their house falling over, they can't get to the supermarket, their kids are scared. So, you almost need a group that can actually go there, rather than just trying to gather the current crop of social workers that are there, because you just don't know what they're going through either. (Jamie)

While engagement in the immediate aftermath of a disaster event was emphasised by the participants, there was some recognition of the value of social workers throughout all the disaster management stages.

### ***Future involvement***

The participants highlighted several ideas about future social worker involvement in disaster management. While social workers are skilful, it was recognised that they might need upskilling in aspects of disaster management so that they can be more effective, especially following a disaster event.

The low profile of social workers' involvement in disaster management in Aotearoa New Zealand was discussed by several participants including Alex who referred to them as "a little bit of an invisible group of people". Similarly, Sam suggested social workers need to have a stronger profile so that the cross-section of disaster management personnel could better understand how their expertise could be most effectively utilised. They admitted having little understanding of social work beyond the government child protection agency and that they could therefore "... miss that there are social workers who don't just deal with children that may be available to me." (Sam). Jamie also linked this low profile in disaster work to their minimal understanding of how social workers could be effectively engaged following a disaster. Generally, the profiling of social workers was negative which could mean the public might resist their support or interventions following a disaster:

... when I hear 'social workers' I think oh god what have they done, or what's that person done straight away. It's not sort of portrayed as I am here to help you, you know, or just be there to support. ... it's got that negative stigma to it. (Kai)

This participant suggested increasing media attention on positive stories about social workers to counteract this negative stereotyping. Further, Sam reflected on the value of deliberately including social workers in their organisation including in public communication. Although, in general, the participants had minimal prior knowledge of the skills and participation of social workers at the beginning of the interviews, they concluded their conversations by imagining and endorsing a more visible and inclusive role for social workers in the disaster management sphere:

...The prompt that you have raised, purely because of this research, saying "Actually I need some aged-care social workers, or a generic social worker, where do I get them

from, where do I train with them, where do I brief them first”... You want your mix of players on the field, so I mean that they without a doubt could add value. (Sam).

In addition, some participants reflected on possible positive developments in disaster management that could include social workers, for instance Alex suggested “...a Ministry for post-event recovery and we could fill that with social workers, psychologists and everyone else that can help in the community, well that would be terrific...”. Jamie also presented a new approach relevant for their role:

Taking a team approach immediately after an event so going around in teams with military, medics and could include social workers as well... (Jamie)

A final consideration, highlighted by Jamie, was that social workers should have a more clearly defined role that can be recognised by both the public and disaster management personnel:

I mean a lot of these social workers are, well they’re just, you know, normal parts of community, but ... because they don’t have a specific role, for instance the military you know, we knew that when we went to a Civil Defence we had a role, and that was our role and that’s what we did. (Jamie)

Similarly Charlie suggested “...it would be interesting to look at how we can make really good use of people who are already professionally trained around dealing with people” signalling their interest in considering how social workers could be more deliberately, and effectively, engaged in disaster management.

## **Discussion**

Registered social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand have predominantly engaged in response and recovery stages of disaster management rather than risk planning and

reduction, reflecting international experiences such as in China and Australia (Alston *et al.*, 2019; Du Plooy *et al.*, 2015; Huang *et al.*, 2011; Ku and Dominelli, 2018). Advocacy and networking were identified as the most common activities in the survey, reflecting the ability of social workers to initiate and participate in bridging activity between individuals and relevant organisations, roles central to the response and recovery phases (Vachette *et al.*, 2017). These tasks contribute to social cohesion and solidarity between affected individuals and communities as demonstrated in other international experiences (Huang *et al.*, 2011; Mathbor, 2007).

To a much lesser extent, Aotearoa New Zealand social workers have been active contributors to the risk reduction and readiness phases of the international disaster management framework. This mirrors Dominelli's (2014) reflection that social workers generally have a low level of influence amongst other practitioners and policymakers. The myriad transferable skills and knowledge social workers possess could, however, be utilised across the full range of disaster management activity (Dominelli, 2014). Further research on the barriers and opportunities for social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand in each of the disaster management phases would be beneficial.

Disaster management as a field of practice is not consistently taught across Schools of Social Work in Aotearoa New Zealand, similar to other countries such as the US (Mathbor, 2007). Arguably, the social work curriculum is already overcrowded (Dominelli, 2014), thus potentially limiting opportunities for increasing the focus on disaster management. That said, given the global effects of climate change, attention should be paid by educators to increasing student awareness of the effects of disasters and the possibility of their involvement, at least post-disaster, during their working life (Ellis *et al.*, 2018). Case studies



of social workers' experiences in disaster management, for instance, could offer a valuable teaching tool both for social work students and disaster management professionals.

Examples of how social workers have effectively contributed to disaster management would draw attention to their transferable skills, values, and knowledge and how they can contribute to supporting the strengths and social development of the affected community (Mathbor, 2007). Creating connections between the social policy and social change elements in the curriculum and disaster planning and preparedness phases will also strengthen graduates' understanding of how they can contribute to these stages.

While social workers internationally have been actively engaged in the different stages of disaster management (for example Du Plooy *et al.*, 2014; Huang *et al.*, 2011), there remains a variable understanding of this by disaster management professionals in Aotearoa New Zealand. Expanding the visibility and understanding of social work by disaster management professionals as well as society more generally, could address the noted concern of under-utilisation of their professional capabilities. While social workers may incorporate concepts of social capital in their practice, the research signals that bonding, bridging and linking not only needs to occur with their clients or the communities in which they work, but also between themselves and individuals and institutions engaged in disaster management.

Social work professional associations, either at the international or domestic level, can have a pivotal role in sustaining and developing the social work profession (Dominelli, 2014; Healy and Meagher, 2004). A worthy task for these associations would be the articulation of the unique expertise of social workers or a scope of practice which could assist other professionals in the disaster management field to better appreciate their value and skills (Healy and Meagher, 2004). Additionally, media releases or good news stories could highlight the positive effects of social work on the lives of people, thus balancing the effects

of negative profiling, especially in relation to care and protection of children. Where linkages between professional institutions and disaster management organisations are weak or non-existent, there lies an opportunity for initiating connections and strengthening the position of social work as an active profession in the disaster management field.

With increased positive profiling, social work as a profession may then have additional opportunities to contribute to transdisciplinary research and practice innovations (Healy and Hampshire, 2002; Sammonds, 2018). In this way they can then promote the production of shared knowledge (Dominelli, 2014) and social responsibility that better supports local communities. Given that many first responders leave the site of a disaster, local social workers have a unique opportunity to be a longstanding presence in an affected community (Mathbor, 2007; Tan and Yuen, 2013). Their deliberate involvement in the planning and mitigation phases of disaster management through strengthening relationships with, for example, government disaster management agencies, could further enhance community capacity building which would increase preparedness for future disaster events (Sammonds, 2018).

A limitation of this study lies with the inclusion of only small numbers of participants and the reliance on a qualitative methodology. Results, therefore, are not generalisable but provide a snapshot of participant views about the research topic. Further limitations include the representativeness of the participants, the instruments used, and the participants' different level of understanding of the social work profession. However, while acknowledging these limitations, the rich data elicited from the interviews and survey offers initial but valuable insights into Aotearoa New Zealand social workers' involvement in disaster management and disaster management practitioners' understanding of social work

in this field of practice. Importantly, the limitations are unlikely to significantly affect the recommendations.

## **Conclusion**

Disaster management is a broad field encompassing a range of professionals. The transferability of social workers' skills and knowledge positions them as effective practitioners in all four stages of international disaster management. A potential barrier for full utilisation of their capabilities lies in the limited understanding about social work and its scope of practice, both for disaster management personnel and the wider public. Positive profiling of social workers generally, and their previous contributions to disaster management specifically, can address this current limitation. Case studies of social worker experiences in disaster management could be a valuable resource to assist with this task and to support student and graduate understanding of their potential involvement in disaster management. Additionally, specific training on disaster management, during- and post-qualifying, will increase social workers' understanding of their valuable contribution to disaster management and strengthen their bonding, bridging, and linking efforts.

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