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Disability and Climate Change:

A Brief on Emergency Preparedness



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Preface to the Broader Project

In recent years, there has been an increase in both academic and community-based research which outlines how persons with disabilities (PWD) have been impacted by climate change, both in Canada and globally. In fact, many scholars and activists have pointed out that systematic interventions which address the intersection between the experiences of PWD and climate change is not only an urgent matter, but also that PWD have largely been omitted from emergency response discourse, especially when it comes to meaningful engagement (Bell, Tabe, & Bell, 2020; Bossard, 2024). This brief is one part of a larger literature review which contextualizes this intersection within the broader climate change crisis.

As Bossard (2024) points out, “change to the environment is one of the greatest challenges of our time, not only because it impacts “communities and ecosystems worldwide” but also because it impacts populations made vulnerable disproportionately (p. 5). Importantly, these impacts are not experienced equally. Increased risk during climate change also includes mortality rates. In fact, “studies have identified higher mortality rates among disabled people than others during natural disasters and extreme weather events” and are less able to access the supports they require (cited in Bell et al., p. 683). Further, as Jodoin and their colleagues (2020) demonstrate, poverty, gender, age and discriminatory attitudes all increase the likelihood of environment hazards for PWD. Climate change already has negative impacts on health outcomes, and projected climate change scenarios will continue to result in worsening health impacts, such as mental health issues, trauma, and disease (Eriksen, Grøndahl & Sæbønes, 2021; Jodoin et al., 2023; Prall, Olazabal, & Lehmann, 2023). As climate change events intensify across the world in many forms such as floods, fires, extreme cold and heat, etc., many issues will continue to follow such as malnutrition from limited food production, issues with relocation, and inaccessible health care systems.

Thus, there is a need for a systematic governmental and community response to the impacts that disasters have for PWD and an examination of the nuances between climate change and disability discourse—in particular, resources for PWD that are currently not adequate and calls-to-action from the diverse, disability communities have largely not been addressed. As Jodoin et al., (2023) state, while PWD are “becoming increasingly vocal in calling attention to the ways in which they are disproportionately affected by climate change” there is a continuous need to “ensure that disability rights are respected, protected, and fulfilled in climate solutions”, which are aligned with the United Nations Declaration of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and other related

treatises (p. 1). In this brief, we review the literature which addresses emergency preparedness and response.

Executive Summary

Many articles in our review consider how PWD are particularly vulnerable in emergency situations. More specifically, PWD are susceptible to environmental hazards, have difficulty accessing support, and experience higher harm/mortality rates when compared to the overall population (Stein, P., Stein, M., Groce & Kett, 2023). While addressing the disproportionate vulnerability that PWD experiences, we also stress that ‘vulnerability’ is created and perpetuated through systematic discrimination which puts PWD in precarious positions. With an intersectional framework, this disparity becomes illuminated when examining the risk factors for PWD who identify as women, are older in age, and are impoverished.

Most authors in our review either conceptualize disability as a homogenous category, or focus on specific disabilities such as spinal cord injury, Deafness, mental health, multiple sclerosis, and physical disability (Alexander, 2020; Gomes, Marchezini & Sato, 2022; Makuyana & Dube, 2024). While an intersectional approach is rarely deployed in the literature, the need for specific responses to particular disabilities during emergencies is a necessity. In fact, many researchers point out that most resources, policies, and other response materials are not designed in accessible formats for particular demographics, and advocate for an individualized design approach so that diversely located PWD can access them when climate emergencies occur. While Universal Design may ensure that resources are accessible to most of the population, some authors suggest that an individualized approach is necessary. For instance, if an emergency preparedness resource is produced in Braille, it may assist with a particular population to remain safe but may not be useful to others who require other formats such as plain language or in ASL. Working with PWD as well as Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) to ensure that resource design is accessible to the diverse needs of the disability community is imperative for ensuring that resources are accessible.

Ultimately, our review illuminates how the nexus of disability and climate change is an emerging discourse, one which requires attention and meaningful engagement from PWD and the broader disability community. One of our key findings is that PWD are often omitted from climate change research and are otherwise not consulted or involved in planning processes to ensure not only that they are prepared for emergencies. The inclusion of PWD also ensures that engagement is done in such a way that respects their autonomy, dignity, and expertise.

Providing Context: A Brief Case Study

One practical example of how climate change has impacted PWD is the 2007 Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. As Lindsay, Hsu, Ragunathan and Lindsay. (2023) found, after

the disaster, many resources were limited for PWD—these included an increased demand for health care and education by families who had children with disabilities. In addition, many PWD were displaced, lost their health insurance, and many were unable to attend work due to transportation, healthcare barriers, and other familial responsibilities. As Engelman, Craig and Iles (2022) state, the response to Hurricane Katrina particularly impacted persons with physical disabilities, who were sometimes abandoned by emergency service personnel, experienced limited access to resources, and had difficulties locating and/or affording forms of communicative and assistive technologies. Lindsay et al. (2023), also note that the hurricane had a larger impact on individuals with pre-existing conditions and/or disabilities. Similarly, people with vision impairments felt excluded from informal and formal supports after a hurricane in Puerto Rico and found it challenging to navigate services. Meanwhile, after a drought in the USA, some households who had a member with a pre-existing chronic disease did not have access to water and cost was a barrier to obtaining clean water” (p. 4353).

Key Issues

'Creeping' Disasters

A theme that was identified in the research was that disasters, emergencies, and crises are commonly viewed as single or short-term events which follow a linear timeline, which includes a beginning and an end point. However, it is important to consider that climate events are caused by several factors and have many complex and long-term impacts which impact environments and communities long after an event occurs. These events are referred to by researchers in our review as *creeping disasters*, or the perpetual state of precarity that PWD and others who experience long-term impacts of emergencies due to climate change which result in a lack of access to water, clean air, etc. (Engelman et al., 2022). Slow moving, yet progressive and long-term climate change impacts how we all (including PWD) access affordable housing, obtain food security and clean water, and are able to live independently in inclusive spaces which have safe air quality (Jodoin et al., 2020; Stein et al., 2023). Creeping disasters particularly impact how PWD access resources such as food, water, sanitation, and housing because the impacts to their well-being and health status can be increasingly acute, yet this issue is rarely addressed in international climate policies. PWD are subjected to climate emergencies disproportionately, yet there is sparse attention paid to the inequitable distribution of social, cultural, and economic power and its overall consequences.

Creeping disasters and the often-insidious nature of climate change emergencies also have indirect consequences for PWD. For example, as Jodoin and their colleagues (2020) point out, PWD are generally under resourced, which means that they are sometimes less able to move to safer areas when an emergency occurs. Further, PWD experience higher rates of food insecurity and malnutrition than the general population, so disasters which impact food security (e.g., due to extreme weather situations such as drought), impact them at a more impactful level. These barriers are attributed to

inaccessible communications when warning and advisories are sent out to the population, physical barriers, the reliance on assistive technology, and economic barriers. Further, creeping disasters, which impact living conditions both before and after a climate emergency impact the already precarious situations that PWD experience - for example, access to medical care, accessible transportation, housing, and employment may all be impacted during the long-term (Barnwell & Wood, 2022). The slow erosion of climate change has both direct and indirect consequences as well as short and long-term effects on PWD, especially when considering the levels of discrimination and precarity they experience as a result of their intersecting identities and the inadequate systematic response they are confronted with.

Proactive Measures

A related theme to *creeping disasters* is the fact that emergency management in North America is primarily designed as a response to single disasters and therefore lacks in qualities such as mitigation, foresight, preparedness, recovery, and resilience. In addition, the current reactive nature of emergency response systems does not prioritize opportunities for PWD and other system actors to create communities which focus on mutual aid, preparedness, and relationality (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2008). Such a community can expose the gaps in existing climate policies related to emergency and disaster response, improve management tactics where holistic solutions at all levels of the disaster cycle, and ensure that PWD have access to robust *preparation* (prior to emergencies; including creating plans, ensuring food reserves, and updating suitable and sustainable assistive technologies, etc.), *response* (during emergencies; including developing helping networks, ensure strong communication, etc.), and *recovery* (after emergencies; including ensuring adequate housing, access to food, personal care, etc.) (Jodin et al., 2023; Smith, Simard, Twigg & Kett, 2017). We will return to a more robust conversation on preparation later in this report.

However, in order to implement proactive measures, change must occur not only at the local level in mutual aid communities, but rather at all levels—including policy change at international, national, provincial/territorial governments and professional sectors. Additionally, developing accessible and individualized assistive technologies is imperative for enhancing the success of proactive approaches to climate change disasters (Benett, Phillips, & Davis, 2016; Friedman, 2023). However, these interventions require a cultural shift towards meaningfully involving PWD in decision making processes—not only when considering proactive planning, but also at holistic and local levels, such as building communities, and developing and implementing assistive technologies which are accessible to a range of individuals with various communication styles (Mac-Seing, 2023).

Collectively, to successfully implement proactive measures an intersectional framework should be deployed—one overarching theme identified in the literature was that PWD experience climate emergencies differently, based on a multitude of factors such as their age, gender, race, sexuality, geographical location, and religion (Cram, Law, Pezzullo, 2022; Sadler, Stein & Stein, 2024; Watfern & Carnemolia, 2024). These

identities not only shape the level of privilege and discrimination they experience during emergencies and impact how proactive measures are put in place but will also impact how PWD interact with their communities and engage with assistive technologies. It is also suggested in the literature that social class and level of income may be particularly important when considering how one experiences climate emergencies.

Communication

To gain a deeper understanding of implementing proactive measures to prepare for emergencies, a deeper examination of communication is required. Effective communication is identified in the literature as one of the most important factors impacting how PWD experience climate emergencies (Gomes et al., 2022; Watfern & Carnemolla, 2024). As Eriksen et al. (2021) remind us, the UNCRPD is clear that documents should be in accessible formats for all PWD, referring to Article 21, which they claim is concerned with the rights of PWD “... to freedom of expression and opinion, including to seek and receive information on an equal basis with others through forms of communication of their choice” (p. 932). Article 29 is also concerned with ensuring that PWD are able to exercise “political rights on an equal basis with others, including safe and accessible... procedures and participation in organisations at international, national, regional, and local levels” (p. 932). When taken together, these two articles demonstrate the importance of accessible formats, which are especially important when safety is at risk, such as a climate emergency (Brossard, 2024).

In articles by Engelman, Booze & Izquierdo (2024) and King and Gregg (2021), the authors demonstrate how important accessible communication is important during climate emergencies. Evidence demonstrates that existing communications from authorities during emergencies (e.g., news reports, emergency alerts on mobile devices) are often confusing, contradictory, and/or miscommunicated. While this ineffective form of communication is problematic for all citizens, the consequences may be more dire for PWD who have communication and/or literacy issues or otherwise have limited access to resources. Engleman and their colleagues state that this lack of communication and awareness is a human rights issue because the diverse needs of PWD are not considered, or as seen as a secondary issue in lieu of communicating to the broader public.

One demographic that is identified as having issues with communication during emergencies is individuals who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing (HH). As Ivey and their colleagues (2014) state, preparedness research should include the involvement of Deaf/HH participants to examine not only the needs of this population, but also their capacity and resilience during emergency situations.¹ This approach would attend to the

¹ Evidence shows that text messaging is an efficient mode of communicating for Deaf/HH during emergencies. For example, in 2004, an advocacy team reported on necessary improvements in the United State that would improve emergency communications among people who are Deaf/HH (Stout, Heppner, & Brick, 2004). As Bennet, Philips and Davis (2016) point out, the advocacy group demonstrated that

unique abilities of Deaf/ HH communities and include developing the already established uptake of new technologies (e.g., texting, smartphones, and video communications). Better adoption of those technologies might help all populations as well, particularly populations with low-literacy levels which require additional communication options. The research also demonstrated that alternative communication formats are also helpful for persons with diverse styles of interacting. For instance, wearable technology (such as smartwatches) which are able to accommodate accessible features such as text, ASL interpretation, spoken audio, plain language are useful ways to provide information to a diverse disability community (Benett, Phillips & Davis, 2016; Uddin et al., 2024).²

The Emergency Management Process: Communication and Beyond

As noted in the previous section on proactive measures, there are several actions that communities can take to ensure that strategies are implemented successfully. The authors of this report reviewed the existing literature and summarized the data from many resources, including articles by Benett, Phillips and Davis, 2016; King and Gregg, 2021; Makuyana and Dube, p. 2024; Smith et al., 2017; Uddin, Islam, Tasnim and Gosney, 2024. Much of what we find in the literature regarding emergency management is related to communication but also covers several other factors which ensure efficient response to climate disasters.

#1) Preparedness:

Wireless technologies should be used to improve communications between PWD and their families, First Responders, and other emergency personnel. Communication plans and other resources should be prepared in advance of emergencies and should also include walking through the steps if the event that an emergency occurs, preparing emergency kits with the necessary supplies, and making sure that contact information is readily available. PWD should be involved in creating and implementing these processes, which ensures meaningful engagement, which we stress the importance of throughout this report.

#2) Response:

texting was very effective and is a promising method for reaching this demographic who may otherwise fail to receive important information about the severity of climate emergencies.

² Benett et al. (2016) also note that drones may be another form of assistive technology to “supplement the effort to search for those who are injured, particularly in more remote locations” (p. 125).

Communication technologies (and efficient communications in general) *are* vital for increasing response times which may reduce to chances of harm or fatality during emergencies. One way to address this issue is to utilize technologies such as cellular (smart) phones. As Benett et al. (2016) claim, 90% of people have access to some sort of smart phone in the United States alone. Poverty rates are higher for PWD than the general population and therefore a lack of finances may be a barrier for PWD (Salvatore & Wolbring, 2021), but research does show that the use of cell phones can drastically improve communications between PWD and others. However, phones must be fully charged and updated, include pertinent information about their needs and contacts, and checked often to be useful. However, the use of cellular technology is only one way to ensure strong communication—research from our review also indicates that individuals will have preferences when communicating which should be taken into account. For instance, for some, social media might be an efficient way to connect with others and receive emergency alerts, while other strategies could include ensuring they are engaging with information communicated through a radio and/or television. Thus, accounting for communication during the response stage of an emergency should be flexible and utilize multiple channels for alerts and responses.

#3) Recovery and Mitigation:

Many individuals struggle to return to their homes or relocate to temporary housing after emergencies, access the healthcare they require, stabilizing a food and water source, and obtain information about compensation regarding damage to their possessions. For PWD and others who are made vulnerable, these struggles have more dire implications, which not also includes potential danger to their physical health, but is also impacted by stressors such as trauma and other mental health issues (Vig & Dwivedi, 2024).³ Another theme that we find in the literature is that climate disaster recovery systems have been ineffective when distributing resources and often do not account for the diverse needs of PWD, including their communication styles. During recovery and mitigation, PWD are often required to disclose their needs, which may have drastically changed from before the disaster. As Cannon and Hall (2021) point out, for PWD, having a back-up plan is often not sufficient; they are forced to perpetually be in back-up mode, especially in geographical areas where climate emergencies are common.

Implementing emergency measures for PWD and addressing how disasters disproportionately impact them also requires the recognition that healthcare services are often inadequate during the response phase. For example, Stein and their colleagues (2024) state that during the 2017 Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, one third of all deaths were caused by disruptions to medical care, a phenomenon which required OPDs to play a pivotal role in providing basic assistance like food delivery and home support. In

³ As Charlson, Ali, Benmarhnia, Pearl, Massazza, Augustinavicius and Scott, (2021) claim, climate events increase psychological distress, worsen mental health (particularly for people with psychosocial disabilities), increased psychiatric hospitalisations, higher mortality and suicide rates for PWD.

addition, Mörchen, Ocasiones Relator and Lewis (2021) found that access to health care after disaster impacted by medical and transportation costs—which they largely attribute to discriminatory attitudes that PWD experienced while in hospitals and receiving care from rehabilitation specialists.⁴

Conclusion and New Directions Forward

In this review, we have provided a brief on some of the pressing issues concerning emergency preparedness for PWD and their allies both before, during, and after climate change situations which disproportionately impact their safety and well-being. To advance disability rights within climate change discourse, our recommendation is to ensure that Organizations for Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) are included in all aspects of emergency preparedness at all levels of research, policy, and planning at local, provincial/territorial, and national levels of governance. PWD have invaluable experiences and expertise in addressing issues with concern them and these considerations should be taken into account when climate change initiatives are enacted.

Another recommendation we have is theorizing and acting in creative ways to enhance new ways of moving forward which meaningfully addresses imminent climate change threats. For instance, in other sections of our review, we emphasize the need for addressing how climate change impacts individuals throughout their lifespan and is dependent on their lived experiences depending on intersectional factors such as their age, geographical location, racial and ethnic identity (Garavito, Chaparro, Jasim, Zanatta, Milliou, Bampa, Huebner & Keck, 2024). For example, youth leadership has made a large contribution to understanding environmental issues in recent years, which Lawrance and their colleagues (2022) argue has contributed to their emotional issues “under the shadow of a climate crisis that is not of their making” but nonetheless impacts their futures and their mental health status (p. 444).

In other sections of this review, we expand on these issues and seek new ways of creating new ways of thinking about environmental change. For instance, as Bennet et al. (2016) state, “reverse socialization” which refers to new ways in which youth leaders, who may have more familiarity with technology, may influence policy and research on how to approach preparation, response, and recovery and mitigation (p. 128). This approach is not meant to diminish the work that has been done in the past by climate change advocates, researchers, and PWD themselves; it is rather a reconceptualization on how knowledge is passed along generationally in search for new and creative strategies and opportunities for addressing the needed, yet complex responses to climate change. While this may be one way to improve emergency response for PWD, preparedness requires proactive collaboration and cooperation with actors at all

⁴ In addition, as Watfern & Carnemolla (2024) claim, PWD disproportionately ‘shelter in place’ instead of evacuating their premises, which can lead to support staff and family to experience burnout and ultimately lead to diminishing levels of care.

governmental and community levels, meaningfully involving PWD and their allies in policy development, and ensuring that communication systems are flexible enough to meet diverse needs, but also utilizes technologies were are available.

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