

**Principal Researcher(s)**

Melodie Hutmacher

**Advisor**

Beth Larcombe

**Instructor**

Sarah Waring

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## Disaster Recovery Challenges and Solutions for New Immigrants

New immigrants and refugees experience significant challenges when settling into a new homeland. Those challenges are stressful enough, but add to that the anxiety and trauma suffered after having experienced a disaster event like a wildfire or flood in their new community and now face the daunting process of disaster recovery, especially when there are many barriers in place that significantly impact a timely recovery, creates extra stress, and creates an extended reliance upon financial aid and mental health resources, which slows the community's overall recovery as the immigrant and refugee population is slower to return to the work force, and, therefore, slower to contribute to the recovering economy.

Given this, it is imperative that emergency managers clearly understand the issues causing these barriers so they can implement workable strategies and solutions into disaster recovery plans.

By researching peer-reviewed publications and studies by field experts that focused on lessons learned and best practices encountered in assisting new immigrants and refugees in disaster preparedness or recovery measures in their new homes within first world countries, and by examining first-hand experience obtained during the Alberta wildfire recovery in 2016, it was discovered that barriers to recovery for new immigrants fell within three themes: financial, linguistic and cultural, and mental health barriers.

Examining those three themes showed many possible solutions that emergency managers can adopt to help reduce the existence of those barriers and ease stresses for the new immigrants and refugees, including:

- developing strong leadership in emergency management by creating solid partnerships with community organizations and immigrant agencies to collaborate on appropriate recovery strategies specific to this population segment;
- ensuring important disaster recovery materials are translated into appropriate languages and in-person translators are provided;
- providing a series of free workshops and seminars that address a variety of useful topics;
- developing relationships with local faith-based and community organizations to assist with translation and cultural education;
- partnering with local mental health organizations to educate and make available mental health resources; and,
- providing cultural awareness training for all recovery staff and volunteers.



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### Structured Abstract

**Introduction:** New immigrants and refugees experience significant challenges when settling into a new homeland (Lafreniere & Diallo, 2010). Those challenges are stressful enough, but add to that the anxiety and trauma suffered after having experienced a disaster event like a wildfire or flood in their new community and now face the daunting process of disaster recovery, especially when there are many barriers in place that significantly impact a timely recovery, creates extra stress, and creates an extended reliance upon financial aid and mental health resources (Hooks & Miller, 2006), which slows the community's overall recovery as the immigrant and refugee population is slower to return to the work force, and, therefore, slower to contribute to the recovering economy.

Given this, what then can emergency managers do to help prepare for and mitigate those challenges and barriers experienced by new immigrants and refugees so that a faster, and less stressful, disaster recovery is achieved?

**Methods:** Literature selected for use included those that supplied peer-reviewed material directly relating to challenges encountered by either new immigrants or refugees, or both, during disaster events and/or during disaster recovery, as well as studies by field experts that focused on lessons learned and best practices encountered in assisting new immigrants and refugees within their present country of residence in disaster preparedness or recovery measures. The articles were also selected for their focus on first world nations to keep relevance as equal to Canadian culture as possible (such as, the United States of America and New Zealand), and for a variety of disaster events (the 1995 Northridge Earthquake, Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and the Canterbury earthquakes in 2010/2011 in New Zealand, to name a few). Content involving recovery within Canadian disaster events was not located; however, substantial Canadian literature involving mental health of immigrants and refugees was available and selected for use.

**Results/Findings:** Research of the selected literature, and examination of this writer's first-hand experience obtained during disaster recovery operations in Fort McMurray, Alberta, uncovered many issues experienced by new immigrants and refugees, and non-English speaking citizens during their disaster recovery. Further analysis revealed three themes under which they could be categorized: financial barriers (Marlowe & Lou, 2013) (Nguyen & Salvesen, 2014); cultural and linguistic barriers; and, mental health barriers, which include issues of fear (Hooks & Miller, 2006) (Loukaitou-Sideris & Kamel, 2004). All issues within these barrier classifications led to a hindered disaster recovery for new immigrants and refugees, which extended their reliance upon financial aid and mental health resources. Additionally, these barriers added further stress and frustration to the trauma of disaster recovery, which, at times, manifested as anger, negative behaviours, and negative outcomes (Marlowe & Lou, 2013). It is important that these issues and barriers be clearly understood so that emergency managers can implement workable strategies and solutions into disaster recovery plans.

**Recommendations:** Examining those three themes showed many possible solutions that emergency managers can adopt to help reduce the existence of those barriers and ease stresses for the new immigrants and refugees, including:

- developing strong leadership in emergency management by creating solid partnerships with community organizations and immigrant agencies to collaborate on appropriate recovery strategies specific to this population segment (Christchurch Migrant Inter-Agency Group, 2011);
- ensuring important disaster recovery materials are translated into appropriate languages and in-person translators are provided (Mathew & Kelly, 2008) (Purtle, Siddiqui, & Andrulis 2011);
- providing a series of free workshops and seminars that address a variety of useful topics (Hooks & Miller, 2011) (Christchurch Migrant Inter-Agency Group, 2011) (Canadian Red Cross, 2007);
- developing relationships with local faith-based and community organizations to assist with translation and cultural education (Marlowe & Lou, 2013);

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- partnering with local mental health organizations to educate and provide mental health resources; and,
- providing cultural awareness training for all recovery staff and volunteers (Khanlou, 2010).

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