No One Left Behind: Building Inclusive, Community-Led Emergency Management for Ageing Demographics

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Introduction

As populations age, communities face growing challenges in supporting older adults during crises, due to limited resources and insufficient preparedness tailored to their needs. This study explores how community resilience and social capital can be strengthened to support older adults during emergencies, given the limitations of public sector resources and based on the premise that older adults are better prepared to respond to and recover from disasters when their social networks are strengthened. Focusing on individuals aged 65 and older, the research examines community-driven approaches that leverage local resources and address immediate needs, given the assumption that government-funded measures are insufficient to meet the growing needs of an ageing population By analyzing academic literature, the study provides evidence-based interventions and research recommendations to bridge preparedness gaps, empowering communities, leaders, and non-government organizations to foster safer, more resilient communities for ageing populations, ensuring no one is left behind.

Background

Canada's ageing population and rising dependency ratio, meaning the number of dependents to the working-age population, are straining healthcare, social services, and pensions, with fewer individuals supporting a growing number of retirees (Statistics Canada, 2019, 2021). This demographic shift, coupled with increasing extreme weather events, places older adults at heightened risk during disasters due to social isolation, physical and cognitive vulnerabilities , and reduced resources. Events like the 2021 British Columbia heatwave, which caused 434 deaths amongst seniors, highlight the urgent need for action (Henderson et al., 2022). With the reduction of measures that ease workforce pressures, such as immigration, government support may be insufficient to adequately safeguard older adults (Fuss & Globerman, 2020). This demands further exploration of effective interventions that can be implemented at the community-level, largely independent of government support to address deficiencies in disaster preparedness.

This study explores how community resilience and social capital can be strengthened to support older adults during disasters, focusing on community-led initiatives. It seeks to answer: "What approaches can build and leverage community resilience to support older adults effectively during emergencies?" By analyzing academic literature, it identifies evidence-based, practical strategies to enhance disaster preparedness, build social networks, and actively involve older adults in planning.

Methods

Research began by identifying key terms such as "older adults," "social networks," "disaster preparedness," and "community resilience," yielding over 8,000 articles from JIBC Library and Google Scholar. Using inclusion criteria and exclusion criteria, 25 articles were selected for review, and of these, 17 articles offering practical findings on addressing older adults' unique needs during emergencies were analyzed further.

Results

Four key themes emerged from the literature which provided insight on community-based strategies to support older adults during disasters:

Strengthening Social Networks: Informal networks of family, friends, and neighbors play a critical role in disaster preparedness and recovery by facilitating resource sharing, reducing social isolation, and providing immediate aid. Findings highlight the importance of these networks in disaster preparedness and emphasize the need to foster informal support systems.

Leveraging Life Experience: Older adults bring valuable knowledge and resilience to disaster preparedness efforts. Their past experiences and community relationships enhance recovery and cohesion, shifting the narrative from vulnerability to active contribution. The literature emphasizes that preparedness efforts should be participatory.

Community Engagement and Participation: Including older adults in planning and decision-making empowers them to take leadership roles, ensures their needs are addressed, and fosters stronger social cohesion. Initiatives like time banking and workshops incentivize participation and build community ties, offering models for interventions.

Community-Based Approaches: Practical interventions focused on disaster preparedness and strengthening social and community networks offer frameworks for further exploration. These include programs that build self-efficacy, encourage social interaction, and reduce isolation, and community activities that foster belonging and resilience.

Discussion

Literature themes were synthesized into three practical community-based solutions aimed at enhancing disaster preparedness and strengthening social networks for older adults.

The **Local Emergency Leadership Corps** involves older adults taking leadership roles in organizing preparedness activities, strengthening social connections, and enhancing their sense of purpose and self-efficacy. An **Intergenerational and Peer Resilience Partnerships**, or a buddy system, pairs older adults with peers or younger generations to foster mutual support, resource sharing, and a sense of belonging. The **Community Currency Volunteer Program** incentivizes older adults' participation in preparedness activities by earning credits redeemable for services, also reducing isolation, and promoting engagement within the community.

Before initiating proposed solutions, older adults' perspectives should be elicited on initiatives intended for their benefit. Engaging older adults in the planning and design of preparedness programs ensures solutions are tailored to their needs, fosters ownership, and promotes active participation. This approach emphasizes building self-efficacy, empowering older adults as capable contributors to community resilience rather than passive recipients of care.

While the study has limitations, including reliance on a small number of non-Canadian studies and the absence of cost analyses, it provides valuable insights into fostering resilience. Challenges include measuring the direct impact of social capital on preparedness and balancing community and government roles. Despite these constraints, the research offers actionable and scalable recommendations to empower communities and older adults, contributing to disaster preparedness and resilience.

Recommendations

Future research should assess the feasibility, cost, and efficacy of the three proposed solutions with efforts prioritizing a participatory approach, incorporating older adults' perspectives to design initiatives that align with their needs and encourage their active involvement.

Further research is recommended to address knowledge gaps in disaster preparedness for older adults, particularly in Canada under the escalating impacts of climate change. Few studies address the needs of socially isolated older adults, especially in rural areas, or consider intersecting vulnerabilities such as ethnicity, health, and socioeconomic status. Existing research often frames older adults as passive recipients rather than active contributors, overlooking their potential role in resilience-building. Additionally, small sample sizes, regional biases, and reliance on self-reported data limit the generalizability of findings to Canada's unique context.

This study highlights the potential of older adults as active participants in disaster preparedness and offers a roadmap for community-driven solutions. Implementing these interventions can enhance resilience, foster social networks, and safeguard vulnerable populations, while future research can refine and expand these strategies for broader application.

References

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