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**“If There Was a Dire Emergency, We Never Would Have Been Able to Get in There”:  
Domestic Violence Reporting and Disasters**

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*This paper examines domestic violence reporting in a community in New Zealand struck by a snow storm. Previous theory and empirical studies are discussed to provide context for the study being presented. The results are based on in-depth interviews with representatives of agencies involved in domestic violence response and emergency management as well as statistics and case file summaries from the predominant non-statutory domestic violence agency in the community. Interviewees were asked about domestic violence reporting and their awareness of any changes during the disaster. Changes were then measured against the statistics made available. Policy and planning in place at the time of the snow storm were examined to determine if agencies were prepared for any changes in domestic violence reporting in the aftermath of the snow storm. Issues that arose from a lack of planning or policy are discussed, and suggestions are made for improving both emergency management planning, but also the*

*planning and policies of domestic violence agencies that must continue to provide services during disasters.*

**Keywords:** Domestic violence; New Zealand; disasters; snowstorm

## **Introduction**

Domestic violence is one of New Zealand's greatest social concerns. One in three women in New Zealand experience some form of abuse in their lifetime (Fanslow and Robinson, 2004). Research since the 1990s has repeatedly demonstrated increased rates of domestic violence during natural disasters (Enarson, 1999; Fothergill, 1999; Jenkins and Phillips, 2008). Until now, however, no research into domestic violence and disasters has occurred in New Zealand. This paper sets out to fill this gap by answering four key research questions:

1. Did domestic violence reporting increase in Timaru during the June 2006 snowstorm disaster?
2. If so, were there any commonalities in the cases presenting to domestic violence agencies?
3. What planning or policy was in place to meet the needs of domestic violence victims during the disaster?
4. Have any changes been made to planning or policy since the disaster?

In this paper, emergency management is viewed as the creation and operation of a framework for communities to reduce their vulnerability to hazards and cope with disasters (IAEM, 2010). This includes the coordination of those efforts and processes necessary to allow the immediate, medium and long term regeneration of a community during a disaster, commonly described as recovery. Whilst one might reasonably argue that all stakeholders should be aware of the potential for the exacerbation of anti-social behaviour following disasters and to take steps to mitigate this, it is rare for emergency managers and policy makers to do so (Houghton, 2010). This failure seriously constrains the capacity of the emergency management sector to achieve its aims. This lack of recognition may be attributed in part to the limited, if growing, documented evidence available.

This paper introduces the event being studied based on data from two previous studies (see Smith, 2007; Wilson et al., 2008). This is followed by a discussion of existing literature and studies that informed the methods of data collection and analysis. Each research question then addressed and the report finishes by discussing the limitations of the study and identifies future research that would enhance understanding of domestic violence reporting and disasters.

## The Snowstorm of 2006

On the evening of 11/12 June 2006, a large low-pressure system moved eastward from the Tasman Sea over the Southern Alps. It rapidly deepened, leading to heavy precipitation. The low was undercut by very cold air from the southwest causing the precipitation to fall as snow. The low-pressure system was disturbed by the topographic barrier of the Southern Alps causing several centres to reform on the eastern side of the divide over southern and central Canterbury. By late morning on 12 June, these areas were covered by record thicknesses of snow from the foothills to the coast (see Figure 1; Hendriks, 2007).

Areas affected by a record snowfall included Ashburton, Waimate and Timaru Districts (shown in Figure 1). In this zone, the regional population (~83,000) is mostly concentrated by the coast in towns such as Timaru (population of 27,200) and Ashburton (population of 17,700), which service surrounding farms. Further inland, scattered farm households and small rural service towns characterise the plains and give way to isolated farm homesteads in the hill country.

The snow caused significant problems in the urban centres along the coast that were unaccustomed to snowfalls greater than a few centimetres. Farmers on the adjacent floodplains were also badly impacted, despite the fact that they experienced significantly less snowfall than those farther inland. On the higher, inland areas, which typically receive some snowfall every year, communities were better prepared. Even here, however, the much greater than normal depth of snow created widespread damage to critical service infrastructure, including the collapse of telephone services, power outages and blocked roads. These conditions were exacerbated by the intense cold for the following six weeks.

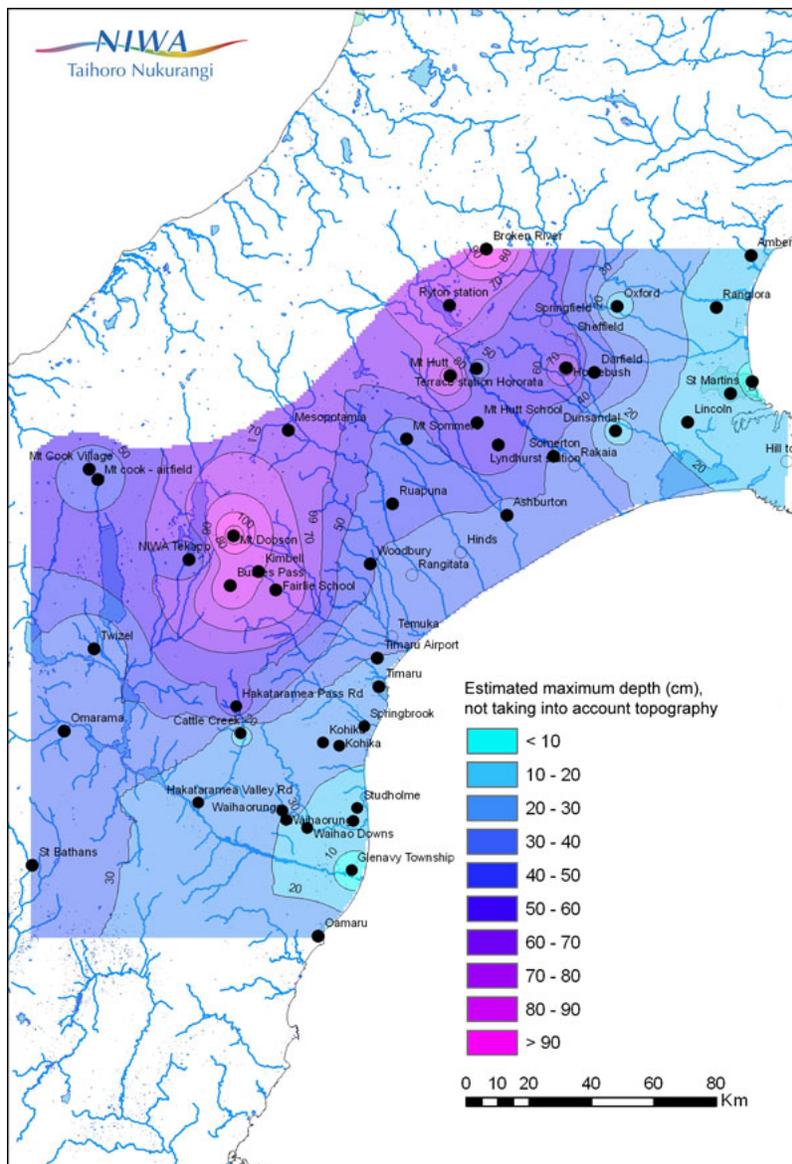
Electricity networks suffered extensive damage as the weight of snow caused above-ground lines and poles to break and tree branches to collapse onto lines. Prolonged disruption of electricity supplies ensued, resulting in approximately 10,000 households being left without electricity supply across the region. Urban communities typically received priority restoration and electricity was restored to most towns within several days to a week. In rural areas, the scale of damage was such that hundreds of households were without power for up to three weeks. Without electricity households faced the challenge of using alternative energy sources during one of the coldest months of June on record. Household workload increased from the loss of electrically powered labour-saving and from having children at home that were unable to access entertainment technologies.

The effects of the electricity disruption were compounded by the failure of the telecommunication network (Smith, 2007; Wilson et al., 2008). Rural telephone and regional cellular exchanges failed after 12-36 hours as batteries were unable to sustain services once the mains power was lost. Restoration of service generally only occurred with the restoration of mains electricity. Close to urban centres, road access was disrupted for periods of a few hours to several days. In more remote areas, roads and side roads remained closed for up to a week after

the event. Blocked roads stopped people getting to work and children to school. People’s access to medical assistance and food was blocked.

The loss of electricity and telecommunications, road closures, increased workloads, reduced mobility and the intense cold had significant negative consequences on the emergency response and increased the social trauma caused by the event. Friends and family often could not be contacted to check on their welfare or to share problems, compounding feelings of isolation. The loss of electricity and disrupted transportation meant many schools across the Canterbury region closed, increasing childcare needs. The sheer work directly created by the snow and clean up increased the workload.

**FIGURE 1: Maximum Observed Snow Depths (cm) From the June 12, 2006 Snow Storm Across the Canterbury Region (Taken From Hendriks, 2007).**



Local coordination of the emergency response was through district Civil Defence emergency operation centres, coordinated by the Canterbury region's Emergency Control Centre. The New Zealand National Crisis Management Centre also monitored the event. Most aid organisations had activated their emergency response plans within 24 hours (often by 9am on 12 June) of receiving warning and initial impact assessments of snowfall from meteorological agencies and field teams. Yet responding organisations reported that it still took approximately three days to properly assess the scale and magnitude of the event and to fully mobilise resources to the scale of impacts.

Government and non-government welfare agencies formed an important component of the emergency response and recovery, for example providing emergency generators, food packages, social welfare payments, tax relief, and labour teams (mainly for farm clean up). Despite this, welfare agencies and many interviewed households did not believe a clear, systematic and on-going assessment of household welfare occurred during the disaster. In fact, some welfare agencies reported they felt uninvolved in response and recovery planning and several complained that local civil defence coordinators make no contact regarding welfare issues, despite a common acknowledgement that many households were struggling in the very cold conditions with limited capacity to replenish essential provisions. Assessing household needs, however, was a difficult task. Thousands of households needed to be checked and agencies were hampered by limited resources, disrupted essential services, cold conditions and reduced staff numbers due to the blocked roads—with many staying home to deal with their own household emergencies. Rural households in particular expressed concern that if there had been an emergency during this period there was no way to notify or access help. This further heightened households' sense of isolation and ultimately their stress.

In addition to their own efforts, Civil Defence and welfare agencies used rescue teams and other volunteer groups to check door-to-door with the support of four wheel drive vehicle owner clubs. In rural areas assessment was limited in many cases to simply flying over households in a helicopter and deciding they were coping if there were signs of movement. Residents felt this was pointless, whereas when it did occur, a visit from emergency management personnel gave a psychological boost to struggling households. Smith (2007) noted that those who received a personal visit from Civil Defence staff “really appreciated it,” noting it was someone to talk to and “a link with the outside world.” Agencies and interviewed households agreed that most people coped for the first couple of days but then begin to struggle as problems emerged or grew as service outages dragged on, workloads increased, and the icy cold persisted. For some, circumstances changed, as where families who had evacuated their own homes began to outstay their welcome in receiving households. Welfare agencies acknowledged the difficulty of gauging evolving community welfare needs, planning the assistance most required, or informing potential clients of the assistance available (Wilson et al., 2008).

### Existing Theories and Studies

Domestic violence and disasters impinge on different bodies of literature each of which provides information and insight on why reporting increases during disasters. The first is that of empirical studies which include some exploration of the relationship between domestic violence and disasters, the second is the literature specifically related to domestic violence, and the third is the broad body of work on the sociology of disasters. Each of these bodies of work provides understanding of why domestic violence reporting may increase during disasters.

It is now widely accepted that disasters are fundamentally social events; a natural hazard event without any interaction with people is not a disaster (Alexander, 1997: 289; Mileti, 1999; Perry, 2007; Quarantelli, 2001; Rodriguez and Russell, 2006: 193; Stallings, 2005). To disaster researchers, physical events are simply triggers for disasters, their underlying causes include social, political and economic factors (Blaikie et al., 1994). Recent events such as the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004 (Amarasiri de Silva, 2008) and Hurricane Katrina in 2005 (Daniels et al., 2006) highlight the fact that the magnitude and course of disasters are shaped by social inequalities, and the capability of local and national institutions to respond to the hazard event. Tierney (2006) among others (Brown, 2009; Davis and Ender, 1999; Dobson, 1994; Enarson and Morrow, 1997; Fordham, 1998) singles out gender as a key dimension of inequality, linked in turn to power, privilege, and social expectations.

Recognition of disasters as intrinsically social phenomena demands that hazard mitigation must move beyond technological solutions. Such solutions only address the accurate and rapid identification of hazards and fail to address society's reaction to hazards and any warning messages. They equally ignore the differential impacts that pre-existing social structures create for different social groups (Mileti 1999; Wisner et al., 2004). This provides a solid argument for a much stronger and effective social response.

Rapid-onset disasters involve natural hazards that have a sharp initiation (and ending). These include floods, earthquakes, tsunamis and hurricanes (Wisner et al., 2004: 10). Such events are distinguished from droughts and environmental degradation, which usually occur slowly but can have longer and more devastating effects on the population concerned. Most research has been conducted on rapid-onset disasters. A plausible explanation for this is that the clear boundaries of these events provide a well-delineated structure for research. Wisner et al. (2004) favour the inclusion of prolonged events, such as droughts and epidemics, in any interpretation of disaster. Quarantelli of the other hand has argued that these should be treated separately as "social problems involving chronic stress" rather than crisis situations (2001: 333). This emphasises Quarantelli's perception, rejected by Wisner et al., that a hazard event should have distinct limits. In both cases, however, there is agreement that disasters are social phenomena.

## Domestic Violence

The terminology and definition of domestic violence are, like those of disasters, the subjects of extensive, on-going debate (Brownridge, and Halli, 1999; Gelles, 1985: 352; Hegarty and Roberts, 2008; Hegarty, Sheehan, and Schonfeld, 1999; Rhatigan, Moore & Street, 2005). Domestic violence researchers themselves have not yet reached a consensus (Rhatigan et al., 2005). However, within New Zealand the most widely used definition of domestic violence cited by both researchers and practitioners, and used in this paper, comes from the *Te Rito Strategy*. This defines domestic violence as “a broad range of controlling behaviours, commonly of a physical, sexual, and/or psychological nature which typically involve fear, intimidation and emotional deprivation” (Ministry of Social Development, 2002: 8).

This current paper focussed on domestic violence against women. There is a strong case that domestic violence is a gendered issue; women are overwhelmingly more likely to be the victim of domestic violence, and men the perpetrators (Bartlett, 2006). Some studies in New Zealand and in the United States suggest that domestic violence is perpetrated equally by men and women (Fergusson, Horwood, and Ridder, 2005; Gelles, 1974; Straus, 1980). However, these studies have been strongly criticised for their lack of contextualisation and their failure to examine the issue of control (Dobash and Dobash, 1988; Saunders, 1988; Vivian and Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 1996; Yllo, 1988). These studies essentially only count the number of violent acts that take place between a couple, without any understanding of the purpose of the violence, or its impact (Johnson, 1995; Saunders, 1988). Critics have argued that such work examines an entirely different social issue, that of “common couple violence,” not domestic violence (Johnson, 1995: 284).

Practitioners in New Zealand report that the majority of victims of domestic violence with whom they work are women (Bartlett, 2006; NCIWR, 2009). This paper focuses on domestic violence reporting. This—coupled with the failure of studies such as those by Fergusson, et al. (2004), Gelles (1974) and Straus (1980) to control for confounding variables—makes a strong case for focussing on domestic violence against women. Further studies into increased domestic violence reporting by male victims would be a worthwhile extension on this research. The high prevalence rate of domestic violence against women emphasises its importance as a social issue. To date, however, in New Zealand, the link between domestic violence and disasters remains unclear.

## Domestic Violence and Disasters

The everyday situation of victims of domestic violence is typically characterised by a lack of social networks, a lack of access to social services, money and other resources, limited decision-making power within the domestic relationship; low self-esteem; and a high incidence of fatalistic beliefs (Bogat, Levendosky, and von Eye, 2005; Hague and Wilson, 2000; Jewkes et al., 2002; Logan et al., 2003; Levendosky et al., 2004; Michalski, 2004). These characteristics

are exploited by the perpetrators of domestic violence to attain and maintain control over the women. These characteristics may also be compound problems in situations of disaster response and recovery. Thus, for example, if a woman is unable to make the decision to evacuate for fear of reprisal, this exacerbates the inherent level of risk and may result in loss of life or the need for external agencies to step in and enforce evacuation (Enarson, 1998b: 1-2). For the most part, emergency management policies assumes that a woman has access to evacuation orders or would be able to respond to them. If a woman is isolated from the outside world, such orders can go unnoticed with the same result as if an order is wilfully ignored.

As noted, an increase in the rate of reported and non-reported domestic violence is a repeatedly identified consequence of all disasters (Brown, 2009; Davis and Ender, 1999; Dobson, 1994; Enarson, 1999; Enarson and Morrow, 1996; Fisher, 2005; Fothergill, 1999; Honeycombe, 1994; Jenkins and Phillips, 2008; Palinkas et al., 1993; Rashid, 2000; Wilson, Phillips and Neal, 1998;). Studies by Enarson (1999); Fothergill (1999); Jenkins and Phillips (2008); and Wilson et al. (1998), however, are the four studies that set out to specifically document the dynamics of domestic violence and its reported level during disasters.

Enarson (1999) investigated the impact of natural disasters on domestic violence shelters in Canada and the United States. This focus at an agency level, rather than at an individual level of reporting, allows comparison with this current study. Enarson notes that in such circumstances, the caseloads of surveyed shelters increased between 15 and 59 percent (1999: 756-757). The same paper showed that lack of time and money resulted in little or no planning by shelters for disasters. As a result, a shelter's limited resources were put under extreme pressure with few staff available to cope with increased workloads (Enarson, 1999: 757). Workloads were further compounded by the necessity in a disaster to manage interactions with other agencies with which they previously had had little or no contact. Enarson cites a specific example observed on Kauai, Hawaii during Hurricane Iniki when the police failed to enforce pre-existing protection orders, leading to shelter staff putting time into following up this failure and seeking change (Enarson, 1999: 758). Increased domestic violence reporting also placed additional financial burdens on agencies. Often, projected fundraising events were delayed and government funds were diverted to general disaster programmes at the expense of women's shelters (Enarson, 1999: 760).

Wilson et al. (1998) examined the impact of domestic violence at an agency level following three events in the United States. In each case, data were collected using semi-structured interviews with agency representatives. Statistical and other material was obtained from domestic violence agencies. Documents and media items over that period were also collected and analysed. Wilson et al. aimed to establish how effectively agencies coped with levels of reported domestic violence in the aftermath of disasters and whether there was a need to establish agencies specifically to meet shorter-term emergency needs. What stands out from this work is that pre-disaster attitudes towards domestic violence "strongly influence the perception and handling of domestic violence after a disaster" (Wilson et al., 1998: 120). The authors argue that where agencies were aware of a pre-existing problem of domestic violence in their community, they were able to adequately handle any increases in reporting (Wilson et al., 1998). Conversely,

if agencies did not acknowledge a prior problem, they equally failed to recognise or respond to any increase in domestic violence after a disaster.

Fothergill (1999) investigated increases in domestic violence following the 1997 Red River flooding in North Dakota and Minnesota in the United States. This work compared the number of women seeking help following the flood data from the year before. The paper noted a significant increase in reporting, and a fall in the number of staff available. While the paper included the impact of the disaster event at an agency level its focus is at the level of the individual. The paper centred on two women who reported domestic violence during the flood itself. Of particular relevance to the current study are stories of two women who reported incidents of domestic violence during the flood. In both cases, the women themselves said that the flooding had acted as a catalyst for them to seek help from domestic violence agencies. These examples illustrate both the situation faced by these women following the flooding and their understanding of the dynamics involved. In the one instance the abuse in the relationship had intensified in the aftermath of the flooding—as the perpetrator experienced increased stress and a sense of loss of control in his relationship. The compounding effects of the flooding and domestic violence compelled the woman to leave her relationship and seek help. In the other instance, the flood allowed the victim of abuse to recognise her own ability to cope and boosted her self-esteem and self-reliance. This allowed her to access support and assistance. Taken together, these two stories show that a disaster can impact the behaviour of both the perpetrator and the victim. Moreover, it is apparent that both domestic violence and domestic violence reporting may increase during disasters. However, this work was based on only two stories. A study that includes a greater number of women would improve understanding in this area.

Fothergill's two examples also highlight how the impact of a disaster may be influenced by the intersection of a disaster with pre-existing social structures (particularly economic status) and the specific needs that influence the decision of whether or not to leave an abusive relationship. Fothergill's work illustrates the absence of a single, universal domestic violence victim. In particular, the availability of financial resources may reduce the need for agency intervention. This has significant implications for policy formulation as well as for those who work with abused women during disasters as well as at other times.

Jenkins and Phillips (2008) report the impact of Hurricane Katrina both on the victims of domestic violence and on domestic violence shelters. Data were collected using four key methods: five focus groups with survivors of domestic violence, interviews with domestic violence advocates, published statistics on domestic violence incidence, and observations of community meetings. The focus groups explored the impact of Hurricane Katrina on women's decision to leave abusive relationships. Interviews with domestic violence advocates focused on the impact of the storm on their services. The community meetings involved participants from legal and social service providers (Jenkins and Phillips, 2008: 55).

Jenkins and Phillips (2008) identified two key issues for domestic violence victims seeking help during disasters. The first was child custody (Jenkins and Phillips, 2008: 56). Children were evacuated with the parent by whom they were accompanied at that time. This was not necessarily

the custodial parent. This policy, which was abused by perpetrators of domestic violence as a means to retain custody of children, caused a major increase in stress levels for domestic violence victims. The second issue was housing. Lack of alternative housing was a significant barrier to victims of domestic violence who wanted to leave their abusive partners. In some cases, a flawed housing policy resulted in abusers sharing a residence with their victims in FEMA-supplied housing (Jenkins and Phillips, 2008: 57). More generally, the cost and availability of housing was a significant barrier to women who wanted to leave abusive relationships (Jenkins and Phillips, 2008: 59). In the aftermath of the disaster, with less housing available, the standard of available housing declined while prices escalated—further compounding the difficulty of choosing whether to escape an abusive relationship or not.

Hurricane Katrina was found to have a dual role both as a marginalising event and as an impetus for change. In some cases, disaster management policies acted as a barrier to victims of domestic violence wishing to leave relationships, particularly those that ignored women's financial situations. This is a potential pitfall that should be avoided in future policy formulation. For some women, however, the disaster motivated change (Jenkins and Phillips, 2008: 61). In cases where the incidence and severity of the domestic violence had increased, women were motivated to leave a relationship. A second catalyst for change came as the event produced a rise in women's self-esteem and self-efficacy, which then encouraged them to seek help (Jenkins and Phillips, 2008: 61). These findings echo those of Enarson (1999) and Fothergill (1999). They also suggest that, although both the scale and nature of domestic violence may change during a disaster, the level of reporting may also increase as a greater proportion of victims seek help. Either of these effects produces an increased workload for domestic violence agencies during disasters.

This review of research on domestic violence and disasters shows that all studies unequivocally identify that domestic violence reporting can increase in the months following a significant natural disaster. Whether it is reporting alone or the level of domestic violence that increases remains unclear, although two of the previous studies suggest that both occur (Fothergill, 1999; Jenkins and Phillips, 2008). The literature also suggests a strong theoretical and empirical link between domestic violence and disasters. As noted previously, this has not been explored in New Zealand to date. This paper examines whether international research and findings are applicable in New Zealand.

## **Method**

Building on the theoretical framework described, a multi-faceted approach was designed to address the key issues of changes in the reporting of domestic violence during the 2006 snowstorm and to explore any associated policy needs. This study is one of five case studies carried out as part of a much larger research project. The same methods of data collection were used in all five case studies, however, this paper focuses on Timaru and the regional snow event in 2006.

Quantitative data, including descriptive statistics from the Women's Refuge database and case file summaries were examined. These data allowed a measurement of change in caseloads and in-depth information about the cases presenting to Women's Refuge. Statistics from the New Zealand Police database were also sought, but the request was refused. Women's Refuge is a non-government organisation that provides both crisis response and prevention services for women and children affected by domestic violence. It has a large number of agencies across the country and its database includes all its registered clients. Each individual Refuge has a summary of the number of its clients for any specified period. This allows determination of client numbers by a range of criteria including ethnicity, service type and age. These allowed the quantification of any increase in incidence and allowed the establishment of the duration of any change in incidence of reporting.

Quantitative data are critical in policy evaluation and research, especially at a time where evidence-based reporting is increasingly popular and has been used in previous studies (Packwood, 2002; Taylor, 2005). Whilst quantitative data can be numerically and statistically accurate, it may not reflect the reality of a situation (Mills, 1959). As a result, the policy derived from quantitative information alone may prove ineffective. Qualitative research can offer a more complementary perspective especially in domestic violence where the quality and scope of record-keeping vary across organizations (Bouma, 2000; Oakley, 1998). In this current research, interviews were used to record the experiences of agencies and individuals post-event and their impressions of what they believe could enable them to cope better with future events. Qualitative research was particularly suited to this instance as there is no prior work on this subject in New Zealand.

Seven semi-structured interviews were carried out in August 2008, two years after the event. The interviews were designed to address issues raised in previous empirical studies and associated theory. They also allowed the interviewees to highlight areas they themselves felt important. The interviews were transcribed and analysed to identify any common themes (across all the case studies) and across agencies.

## **Results**

### **Changes in Domestic Violence Reporting**

Data provided by Women's Refuge showed a reduction in the number of reported cases at the onset of the snowstorm. Perhaps inevitably, throughout the period when power and phone lines were out of action, few cases of domestic violence were reported. Indeed, throughout the whole month of June, only four new cases were reported. This is well below the monthly average of 14 new clients over the period June 2005 to May 2007. In July 2006, when communications had been restored after the snow storm, the number of new clients jumped to 25, almost double the monthly average (14 cases) of the previous two years. There had been some fluctuation, over the two years, but no monthly total was as great as that of July 2006. Thus, while in the

immediate aftermath of the snowfall the reported incidence of domestic violence decreased, this situation was reversed as time passed and as communications were restored. This was noticed by the lead case worker at Women's Refuge and discussed with the manager (interviewed in this study) as it caused a significant increase in her workload:

Well, from talking to the case worker, she said she was absolutely snowed in, if you don't mind the pun, with caseloads coming out her ears...

Though the records of the Timaru Police were not made available for this research, the officer interviewed acknowledged a decrease in domestic violence reporting in June 2006. However, rather than a subsequent increase in the level of reporting in July, the interviewee described the numbers as having resumed to "normal" in July 2006 and in subsequent months.

...in fact during the snow period—sort of the week or two after, we actually had a decrease in reported incidents. That was in the urban environment...

The decrease in reporting was put down to a lack of access to phones and police stations due to the snow, rather than a decrease in domestic violence itself:

We actually found there was a lower increase in reporting than normal sort of day-to-day because basically people weren't able to get out and about so people hunkered in houses and that sort of thing...

In contrast to the opinion given by the police officer in Timaru, the Women's Refuge case file summaries suggest that there was indeed an increase in domestic violence reports to the police. Case file summaries provided by the Refuge include reference to the source of referral. Of the 25 clients that accessed Women's Refuge's services in July 2006, 23 were referred through the police. The discrepancy between the case file summaries and the interview with the officer may be explained in part by the time delay between the event and the interview, or because for a larger agency, the increase may not have posed as great a problem as for smaller voluntary agencies. Issues of nostalgia, the personal bias of either the interviewer or interviewee and the impact of outside sources' version of events can alter the way in which an event is remembered (Kirby, 2008: 24-27; Thomson, 1998: 584). The use of statistics and case file summaries addresses such potential short-comings of interviews and this particular situation suggests that the officer's memory may have been altered over time or that increased reporting did occur, but it was not recognised by the police.

Work and Income New Zealand, Canterbury Rural Support Trust, and Presbyterian Support Services reported no noticeable increase in domestic violence cases in the months after the snow event. It is important to note that they did not report a decrease in those same months either, suggesting domestic violence cases were still being seen by those agencies during the disaster. Most of these agencies stated that they had no formal way to identify domestic violence cases

from their files and so could not say for certain whether there was a change. However, they could not remember a significant change and so from this analysis, the increased domestic violence reporting did not extend beyond Women's Refuge. Women's Refuge non-statutory status and focus on working with domestic violence victims make them the agency most commonly sought by domestic violence victims in New Zealand.

During a disaster, Work and Income has an increased overall workload, as it is responsible for disseminating financial support for disaster-affected families. Whilst its workload clearly increased, it could not be discerned from the case files whether there had been an increase in the number of women seeking grants or the benefit allowance when leaving an abusive relationship.

### **Commonalities across the Cases**

Women's Refuge representatives were asked what factors they believed lay behind the increased reporting they had experienced and whether they could see a relationship between the snowstorm and the increase. Stress was the number one reason identified. The South Canterbury Women's Refuge representative said:

...it was like a combination of the stress—the stress that the women were under, and in general...a lot of children couldn't go to school so children were home...just the whole thing.

The stress originated in numerous areas of life for the families. The financial cost of the event to families—through having to repair damage caused by the snow, loss of income from being unable to leave the house to work and other costs associated with the snow. The extra work required to recover from such an event (particularly in the rural areas) meant that many had to work 15+ hour days in harsh conditions. Having children at home unable to go outside or use electronic gadgets for entertainment on top of clean-up work put an additional pressure on many households. Finally, the isolation caused by lack of access to telecommunications and by blocked roads combined with the general uncertainty experienced as a result of a lack of information about emergency management further worsened the stress levels (see Smith, 2007; Wilson et al., 2008).

The complexity of the dynamics at play between domestic violence and disasters is not fully revealed through these interviews. Stress alone does not explain why some relationships are abusive during a disaster and others are not. Nor does it explain why perpetrators of domestic violence are violent at home and not necessarily in the public sphere.

Enarson (1999) discusses the multi-faceted and reciprocal relationship between domestic violence and disasters that leads to an increase in reporting. The event itself impacts both the perpetrator and the victim. This can mean that domestic violence in the relationship heightens and increases in frequency. This was seen in Timaru:

It may be fair to say that it moved on to more intense (violence) and more often too

The increase in frequency and intensity could be the prompt for a woman to seek help. Events not only push perpetrators of domestic violence beyond their limits but also influence victims. The level of violence that may be ordinarily tolerable seems now excessive, not only because it may have escalated but also because the bar has lowered. Added to this, the woman no longer accepts the violent behaviour of their partners. This was observed in the cases seen by Women's Refuge:

...They are already, long before the snow comes, they are in a situation that is not quite as healthy as they would want it to be. So anything like this—be it a major flood or snow, is going to accelerate the feelings this women has got. And make everything seven times worse...no it was definitely underlying and this sort of brought it up to the surface. It was tolerable before but the event kind of pushed it up, yeah, and so it wasn't any more.

This statement supports the idea that the event itself is not the cause of increased domestic violence, but may be a trigger for increased violence within an already abusive relationship and may also trigger an increased reporting of violence. This is supported by data in the case file summaries of Women's Refuge. These include information on whether this is the first time a woman has sought help, and how long the abuse had been occurring in the relationship. Whether it is a first time reporting does not support a causal relationship between the event and the reporting, but it does identify the number of women who had not previously been motivated to report. The second variable, the duration of abuse prior to reporting, is a much more telling statistic in terms of understanding whether domestic violence had increased in association with a natural disaster, or whether reporting has increased.

Of those women who had accessed Women's Refuge services during the event, 57.2% had not been to a Refuge before. In effect, the majority of these clients were first-time reporters. However, the most common duration of abuse had been between two and ten years (65.9%). Thus, the abuse that led them to seek help during the natural disaster was not new, or *caused*, by the disaster so it is more likely that it was domestic violence reporting that increased, not the prevalence of domestic violence.

The natural disaster may also provide more opportunities for escape from domestic violence, aid and may provide for a bus ticket out of town, while the loss of the family home and shared resources may lead a woman to feel she has little left tying her to the relationship (Enarson, 1999).

### Plans in Place at the Time of the Disaster

No agencies in this study had an emergency management plan or policy in place to address the need of maintaining domestic violence services during disasters, or to meet any possible increase in demand. A lack of planning by Women's Refuge resulted in a number of problems, which no doubt cascaded down to affect women and children seeking its services. The organisation is, even in good times, characterised by a scarcity of resources, and this influenced its ability to adapt to the snow event.

A significant issue reported by Women's Refuge was a lack of physical access to its safehouse for a week after the initial snow dump. Without the use of an all-terrain vehicle, the Refuge had no way to access its safehouse to check on the women and children living there:

Yeah for a whole week...We couldn't get in to the safehouse for a start. I mean the snow blocked all the roads and that. So it was a matter of not getting in to the safehouse at all—we were fortunate enough that the phones were still going, so we had phone contact with those women. We eventually got in, but it wasn't just an easy task.

This lack of access created a number of risks. An inadequate supply of food and water and no access to additional resources meant that residents had to ration supplies. The Refuge also stated that due to a lack of funds to buy enough food to stock up, there was inadequate food in the safehouse for the period it was cut off:

I know we are not very stocked up very well. Like we do not have any, well we might have a bit of bread in the freezer, but we do not have any milk—things like that...For a start, we cannot afford to buy it. We rely on donations, and so it is just whatever comes in. And the problem with donations is that you cannot keep them for that long because they spoil so we end up giving it out to our community women.

Second, the lack of food and support during the snowstorm's initial stages could have caused a woman to contact her abuser under the impression that her situation might be better if she returned to the relationship and home. On the other hand, the perpetrator could have known the location of the safehouse and used the storm as an opportunity to gain access to the house and his family when police were distracted by the snowstorm and associated demands. Regardless of the reasons, had a perpetrator attempted to access the house, Refuge workers and the police would have been unable to get help quickly. Staff members were aware of this issue:

If there was a dire emergency there, we would **never** have been able to get in there.

Aside from the issues related to the safehouse, two other issues arose regarding staffing. The first is that the number of staff at the Refuge was significantly reduced during the snow event, as staff members were cut off and unable to get to work and volunteers had to deal with their own domestic needs due to the storm. Women's Refuge staff are reliant on volunteers with an average of 72% of their workforce being unpaid staff, and this has significant implications for situations where a natural disaster impacts directly on the volunteers' homes and families (NCIWR, 2005). Women's Refuge reported that some staff members, particularly volunteers, could not get in to the Refuge because the roads were blocked or because they were busy with their own cleanup. The attitude was that Women's Refuge could not expect volunteers to work in situations when they had their own families to take care of and were not being paid.

It was basically just about three of us who were paid workers, only because we were the only who were directly responsible. You know, you can't expect a volunteer to come in from out of town, and she couldn't get there at any rate.

This is a fundamental difference between Women's Refuge (and other non-government organizations) and governmental agencies and is an issue overlooked in much Civil Defence planning and policy. Government organisations such as the police and Work and Income can usually rely on their staff to turn up for work during a disaster and also may have the benefit of secondary staff from other areas being made available. Organisations like Women's Refuge do not have an extended pool of staff to draw from.

The second staffing issue was that the workload for the remaining staff increased due to the lack of volunteers, and was compounded by the increased numbers of women seeking help. This placed an added burden on already stressed Refuge staff and no doubt affected the level of service they were able to provide.

The majority of clients that Women's Refuge worked with during the disasters were first-time reporters. If a woman seeks help and is met with poor service, this will negatively influence the likelihood of her reporting again (Allen et al., 2004; Barnett et al., 1996; Berk and Newton, 1985; Berk, Newton, and Berk, 1986; Davis et al., 1994; Holiman and Schilit, 1991; McDermott and Garofalo, 2004; Sullivan, 1991; Sullivan and Bybee, 1999). If such first-time reporters are ultimately able to make the decision to leave an abusive relationship, but come in contact with an agency that is unable to manage its caseload, the opportunity to work with this woman could be lost.

Although none of the organizations other than Women's Refuge raised any specific issues related to domestic violence during the 2006 disaster, all agencies reported a lack of communication and co-ordination between the agencies involved in the emergency response and those specifically involved in responding to domestic violence. Women's Refuge did not communicate their increased workload to any other agencies at the time of the event. Other

agencies that on a daily basis work closely with Women's Refuge made no contact with the Refuge to ascertain if the agency was coping. Even if reporting levels had remained steady, agencies that work closely together would have benefitted from such interaction. Showing concern for staff at other agencies would have built rapport and strengthened relationships. Given the increased reporting has been substantiated by this study, domestic violence agencies should address this need to communicate better as part of their response to disasters.

### **Changes to Planning or Policy**

At the time of the interviews, two years had passed since the snowstorm. The process of conducting this study raised awareness but has, to date, led to no changes to planning or policy within the Refuge or within civil defence response agencies in Timaru. It also was made clear to the authors that without additional external support and knowledge, this was unlikely to occur, at least for the Refuge:

...really, we're so stretched in everyday life that we can't be thinking about these things, and stretched financially at any rate. You've got to prioritise and really that's a last priority. But in saying that I believe it's probably a very important priority to have that in the background.

Women's Refuge is aware of the need to make changes so women and children in their care during disasters are still assured of the best quality service possible, and are kept safe. Stretched resources and lack of awareness of best practice for continuity in disasters is a huge barrier to these changes.

Civil Defence planning, in Timaru and across New Zealand, currently does not include provision for increased domestic violence reporting during an event. There is some anecdotal awareness of increased domestic violence at both a national level and local level, but this has not resulted in any formal planning or special preparations by Civil Defence.

The Timaru Civil Defence representative stated that he had heard *after* the event that domestic violence had increased, but this was only after Civil Defence had officially declared the emergency over. The information came through a casual conversation with an agency worker and the impact of this information ended there. No changes had been made to Timaru Civil Defence policy since the event, and no contact had been made with domestic violence agencies in the subsequent two years.

The recording system at Work and Income New Zealand has changed since this event (through an unrelated policy change) and the organisation now specifically records cases of domestic violence. In future events, Work and Income will be able to identify whether the incidence of domestic violence increases. This is a positive for future research into the scope and scale of increased domestic violence reporting during and after Civil Defence emergencies in New Zealand.

This case study explored here is one of five conducted on disaster in New Zealand. All the case studies expose an increase in domestic violence following natural hazard events. Each the five case studies has identified problems related to inadequate resources and staffing to meet needs. In no instance has this evidence resulted in changes made to policy or planning, at least to date.

Policy and planning are vital to ensure that the lessons learned from disasters are addressed and not lost due to changes in staff and the time gaps between disasters. Many of the representatives of agencies interviewed referred to personal lessons learned from each event. Each event should provide the agencies involved with an opportunity to test their policies and procedures and to identify and address any lapses or gaps. However, these lessons have not been applied subsequent to the snow storm in South Canterbury or in any other instances. As individuals leave an agency or encounter the next “crisis” situation, any lessons may be lost. The loss of organizational memory is a common feature in these circumstances.

The process of policy development provides an opportunity for policy makers to evaluate the possible future scenarios that could occur in the future. New Zealand has not experienced an event on the scale of Hurricane Katrina in the United States or the Boxing Day tsunami in Southeast Asia in modern times. The lessons from such major overseas events offer an opportunity for New Zealand to develop its own best practice for large-scale events.

## **Discussion**

### **Limitations of the Research**

Research on increased domestic violence and natural disasters is a real issue of concern. This paper is the first on this topic in New Zealand and while it has acknowledged limitations, it is a necessary first step to highlight the issue. Identifying the extent to which increased reporting is directly linked to natural disasters is something that could only be determined if each woman that accessed services in the months after the event were interviewed. This was not possible and so the paper has only been able to measure changes in reporting and whether those involved in the response to domestic violence believe changes in levels of reporting were related to the disaster. Future research would be eased if recording enabled the identification of a natural disaster as a factor in the decision making.

### **Future Research Possibilities**

Further research could significantly improve understanding if it involved interviews with women who experienced a change in their abusive relationship during a disaster. This paper has presented some, admittedly limited, baseline data on domestic violence reporting during one natural disaster. Participants themselves noted that in contributing to the research for this paper, their awareness of the issues has been raised. Future research that compares changes in the level

of reporting, and an agency's ability to respond will be the best measure of whether this research has resulted in positive change.

### Conclusions

The June 2006 South Canterbury snowstorm impacted the community in a multitude of different ways. The storm stressed individuals and impacted their relationships. Agency response varied in quality, related to their level of preparedness and planning prior to the event. This was especially evident in those agencies where a lack of planning led to potentially unsafe conditions for domestic violence victims and their children. It also led to staff carrying an increased burden of work. These findings have significant implications for policy and planning for future disasters.

There is a need for Civil Defence and other statutory agencies to work more closely with voluntary agencies to address current gaps in emergency planning and policy at national, regional and local levels.

Victims of domestic violence are not homogenous, but diversified by their age, class, ethnicity, education, and other social markers. This complexity increases the challenge of an effective response. What this paper highlights is that domestic violence agencies must operate at a high level during disasters to ensure that these already vulnerable women and children are not at an even greater risk.

This is the sixth published study with a specific focus on domestic violence reporting during disasters. All these studies have identified, across three countries, an increase in domestic violence following disasters. Lack of data collection capacity by responding agencies limits the determination of cause or scale of domestic violence increases. Despite its limitations, this paper has further highlighted an issue of significant interest and importance and one with major policy implications.

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