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BROADSHEET NO. 1: 
EXPOSURE TO AND 
IMPACT OF THE 
FLOODS

About the study

Between 2008 and 2010, the SettleMEN study followed a group of 233 recently arrived men from refugee backgrounds living in urban and regional Southeast Queensland with the aim of documenting their health and settlement experiences. The study found that overall, these men bring important resources that may help them to cope better with the challenges of settlement: good levels of subjective health status, mental health and wellbeing; good family and social support; and good levels of engagement in tertiary/trade education in Australia. Over time, however, their levels of wellbeing decreased as they experienced barriers to social participation and inclusion within their host community, including: unemployment and difficulties securing good jobs (even for those with tertiary/trade qualifications obtained in Australia), financial stress, difficulties accessing housing, limited interactions with neighbours, and experiences of racism and discrimination. Importantly, although men living in the Toowoomba-Gatton region acknowledged some of the benefits of regional settlement, they faced greater barriers to participation in the labour market, reported lower job satisfaction, and were more likely to experience social exclusion overall.

In 2012–2013, using a mixed-method approach and a peer interviewer model, we were able to conduct a follow-up of 141 (61%) of the original 233 SettleMEN participants to document the impact of the January 2011 Queensland floods on their health and settlement. This broadsheet focuses on participants’ degree of exposure to and impact of the floods, their perceptions of safety and security, and their vulnerability and adaptive capacity to extreme weather events.

About the SettleMEN-2 participants

The SettleMEN-2 participants were born in Africa (75%), Middle East (16%) and Southeast Asia (9%), with an average age of 36 years (range 22 to 62 years), and have lived in Australia for an average of 6 years (range: 4–8 years). Fifty five percent were living in Brisbane, 43% in the Toowoomba-Gatton area, and 2% in other areas. Over half of participants were married/living together (55%), and had tertiary/trade qualifications obtained in Australia (53%). Twenty three percent were unemployed, 33% employed full-time and 44% employed either part-time or casual.

Two-thirds of participants reported a weekly income of between $400 and $799, while 22% reported an income of less than $400 per week. Three-quarters spoke English well or very well.

Special points of interest:

Natural disasters could undermine the resettlement and integration experiences of people from refugee backgrounds.

Pre-migration experiences could be a great source of resilience in the aftermath of a natural disaster.

A natural disaster may positively influence social interaction among a diverse population.

Emergency and disaster response services may benefit from the skills and capabilities of people from refugee backgrounds.
Exposure to and impact of the 2011 floods on participants, their families and communities

The figure above summarises the exposure to and impact of the floods on participants, their families and communities by areas of settlement. Overall, participants living in the Toowoomba-Gatton region were more likely than those living in Brisbane to have been directly exposed to and affected by the floods. As the following statements indicate, the impact of the floods on men’s sense of safety and security was particularly noteworthy among those living in the Toowoomba-Gatton region:

"Due to flooding there is a sense of insecurity always in Toowoomba."

"I live in Gatton... there is always a feeling of insecurity when I go to sleep."

"The impact of the flood was extreme and disastrous... I’m scared and a bit concerned about the rapid changing of weather in Australia."

"I feel like leaving Gatton, but there is no better place than Gatton where I can get farm jobs."

“I survived bombs and hunger in my country and refugee camps, but here I can be rescued by a helicopter or emergency police.”
Assistance during and after the floods

Among participants directly affected by the floods, 40% of those living in Brisbane and 95% of those in the Toowoomba-Gatton region were assisted by family and friends from the same ethnic community during and after the floods. Similarly, assistance from neighbours and volunteers (outside their ethnic communities) was reported by 40% of participants living in Brisbane and 93% of those in the Toowoomba-Gatton region. Overall, participants felt supported by government and non-government agencies during and after the floods as stated below:

“Care and security level …are far better than our country. For this reason I feel secure and safe even in the time of natural disaster”

Changes in interaction with neighbours

Prior to the floods, many participants reported limited interaction with their neighbours. However, for 20% of participants living in Toowoomba-Gatton and 8% of those living in Brisbane, their experiences during the floods impacted positively on their relationship with neighbours. For example, one respondent stated: “Due to the assistance I rendered to my neighbour’s children, our interaction has improved”

While another said: “Interaction between my neighbours and I has improved because we assisted them to drain water out of their houses”.

One participant explained how his neighbours “began to greet me because I assisted them in the floods”. These positive changes have been sustained two years after the floods.

Previous refugee experience and the 2011 Queensland floods

Sixty-nine percent of men living in Brisbane and 59% of those in Toowoomba-Gatton reported that their previous refugee experiences helped them to better cope during the 2011 floods, as reflected in the statements below:

“My past experience has taught me to be resilient in times of hardship”
“I was used to worse in a refugee camp”
“From our previous experience we could manage to stay some time with very small amount of food and no income”

However, participants compared their experiences with that of their children, many of whom had not experienced disasters prior to the 2011 floods. One respondent explained that:

“Although my wife and I were not much affected due to our backgrounds from South Sudan, my children were very much affected since they have never experienced such disasters in their lives”.

During the floods, a number of participants used past strategies and skills learned during their refugee experience, as shown in the following statements:

“I was able to apply strategies used before as refugee in dealing with difficult situations such as relaxation approaches to monitor positive mental state”

“[Previous refugee experience] helped us prepare and act in a safe manner to protect ourselves like what we would do during war times”

“It reminded me about life in camps and war… how to evacuate… keeping calm, courageous and following instructions on how to evacuate the area we were living in. Of course my previous experience helped me a lot to cope with the floods. Compared to Australians, I was very much less stressful than they were.”
Conclusions

Overall, the 2011 Queensland floods had a considerable economic and psychosocial impact on this group of men from refugee backgrounds, their families and communities.

However, many of these men reported that the skills and resilience gained from their previous refugee experiences helped them to cope better during and after the floods.

For some, providing assistance to others during the floods impacted positively on their relationships with their neighbours.

Policy and practice implications

These findings challenge the widespread deficit model that defines people from refugee backgrounds as traumatised victims.

The strengths and capabilities of people from refugee backgrounds, including the survival skills developed during their refugee experience, can enhance a neighbourhood or community’s ability to cope with and adapt to extreme weather events and other environmental disasters.

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