



Children and the Canterbury Earthquakes

Child Poverty Action Group Background Paper
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About Child Poverty Action Group

Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) is an independent charity working to eliminate child poverty in New Zealand through research, education and advocacy. CPAG believes that New Zealand's high rate of child poverty is not the result of economic necessity, but is due to policy neglect and a flawed ideological emphasis on economic incentives. Through research, CPAG highlights the position of tens of thousands of New Zealand children, and promotes public policies that address the underlying causes of the poverty they live in.

If you would like to support CPAG's work, please visit our website: www.cpag.org.nz

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Introduction

In 2010 and 2011, Christchurch experienced a number of major earthquakes. The most serious, on 22 February 2011, caused loss of life and widespread damage to public buildings, infrastructure, land, schools, workplaces and people's homes.

It is now more than three years since the first earthquake on 4 September 2010. Recently, Christchurch journalist Beck Eleven asked a number of young people between the ages of 10 and 20 to write about their lives in Christchurch.¹ Each was able to write, in their own words, about any aspect of their life in their city and they were neither asked nor had to reference the earthquake. That they all did illustrates how the last three years have affected all who live here.

As Christchurch continues the slow grind towards recovery, what is it like for the children still living here? To help answer this question, this paper will first briefly consider the international research into how children and young people are affected by natural disasters and how the Canterbury earthquakes fit within this framework. In particular, or at least where possible, how this has affected Christchurch's most vulnerable children.

The second part of this paper will focus on two issues; housing and schools in post-earthquake Christchurch. These have been chosen for a number of reasons. First, long-term difficulties after a natural disaster are more likely to be present in children who have lost their homes and are forced to relocate, and in children whose schools are disrupted in some way, for example, by having to move or introduce changes to the school day or programme. Secondly, getting both these issues right post-disaster plays an important part in a child's recovery, and third, because for many Christchurch children home and school have yet to return to pre-earthquake "normal".

How are children affected by earthquakes?

International research confirms that natural disasters are traumatic for children and young people², particularly if as a result of the disaster a child loses part of their immediate and familiar environment, for example their home or school, and when their entire community is affected by the disaster.

Although there is no such thing as a "good" natural disaster, earthquakes can be differentiated from other disasters by their complete absence of what can be described as "controllability". Unlike most other natural disasters earthquakes occur without warning, leaving people with no opportunity to minimise loss, damage or injury by, for example, evacuating from risk areas and tall buildings. In addition, earthquakes have no clearly defined endpoint. Aftershocks can continue over a long period of months, or even years. This both extends the possibility of further injury and damage, and causes people to relive the sensations of the initial traumatic experience, delaying their recovery.

The Canterbury earthquakes provide a stark illustration of this last point. Unlike most other natural

¹ "Young Voices of Christchurch: Tales from the Youth of Christchurch" Beck Eleven 16 June 2013 <http://www.stuff.co.nz/the-press/news/8799602/Young-voices-of-Christchurch>

² Lazarus P, Jameson S, Brock S (2003) "Responding to Natural Disasters: Helping Children and Families" www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/naturaldisaster_teams_ho.aspx

disasters the Canterbury earthquakes are more accurately described as a multiple, as opposed to a single, event. In his briefing paper to the Government on the likely psychosocial effects of the Canterbury earthquakes³, the Prime Minister's chief science advisor Sir Peter Gluckman confirmed that a "distinct feature" of the quake series was that the first in September 2010 "caused sufficient damage to induce significant traumatic stress in its own right", and then some way through that recovery cycle, the more devastating February 2011 quake returned people back to the very beginning of recovery.

For those who live here though that tells only part of the story. Since September 4 2010 Christchurch has experienced more than 12,500 aftershocks - mostly minor. Even as late as December 2011, 15 months after the first quake, Christchurch experienced a cluster of quakes of significant magnitude to cause closure of public buildings, damage to infrastructure and further liquefaction. It is hard to determine then when the "recovery cycle" for some people actually began.

A child's reactions to traumatic events such as earthquakes vary and will depend on factors such as age and the severity of the child's experience but can include, for example, bed-wetting, nightmares, an increased need to be always with their parents, behavioural changes, an increase in physical symptoms such as headaches and stomach aches, changes in appetite, and depression.

The post-earthquake experiences of Christchurch's children and young people are consistent with international research. In the period immediately after the earthquakes parents, schools and doctors reported an increase in behavioural issues and problems relating to anxiety, depression and stress. There were also some less expected effects; in 2011 there was a significant increase in the number of people, including children, with stress-related alopecia, or hair loss.⁴

Long-term problems related to the earthquakes and their aftermath, however, are also evident. Preliminary results of a University of Canterbury study of 100 children starting school in 2013 indicate that between 14% and 21% are displaying symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.⁵ The research is based on a small number of children and in its early stages, but finds increases in both learning and behavioural problems. These can include, but are not limited to, loss of interest in play, an increase in aggressive behaviours, anxiety at being separated from parents and other family members, problems with concentration and sleep problems.

It is worth remembering that 2013's new entrants were just two and three when the major earthquakes struck yet initial research indicates that those aged between 2 and 8 years at the time of the quakes are at particular risk. It is more difficult for very young children to understand the event and the aftermath.

The number of young people in Christchurch referred to specialist mental health services, increased markedly after 2010,⁶ but more significantly, acute admissions and emergency incidents are continuing to rise, both in number and severity. In the first three months of 2013, the Child,

³ "Psychosocial effects of the earthquake" – extracts of report published 2012 <http://www.parliament.nz/resource/0000236512>

⁴ McKenzie- McLean J "Quake stress may cause hair loss" 24 August 2011

<http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/health/5495896/Quake-stress-may-cause-hair-loss>

⁵ Liberty, K., Macfarlane, S., Basu, A., Gage, J. and Allan, M. (2013) *PTSD symptoms and coping in children beginning school: Preliminary findings*. Christchurch, New Zealand: Researching the Health Implications of Seismic Events (RHISE) Symposium, 22 Nov 2013. In *The New Zealand Medical Journal* 126(1386) <http://journal.nzma.org.nz/journal/126-1386/5930/>

⁶ Mathewson N "Quakes take toll in young" 18 May 2013 <http://www.stuff.co.nz/the-press/news/christchurch-earthquake-2011/8689572/Quakes-take-toll-on-young>

Adolescent and Family Mental Health Service managed double the number of emergency incidents they would usually receive. The health problems are also becoming more serious and include family violence and adult mental health issues in young people. The Service's Clinical Director, believes this increase is representative of a stressed community;

"The earthquake is ingrained in everyday life now. It's like the war; it's become part of the fabric." Dr Harith Swadi, Clinical Director, Child, Adolescent and Family Mental Health Service

Vulnerable populations and natural disasters

*"Even in developed countries, disasters have a knack of finding the poor and vulnerable"*⁷

International research into natural disasters such as Hurricanes Andrew and Katrina, confirm that even when an entire community is affected by a natural disaster, and even in a developed economy, a community's vulnerable populations are affected disproportionately.

The reasons for this are complex but include that it is more difficult for those on low incomes to accumulate the financial reserves to buy emergency supplies (bottled water, additional food, alternative heating and light sources) both in anticipation of a natural disaster, and after one occurs; and that low income households are more likely to live in inadequately built or maintained housing that is more vulnerable to damage. After a disaster, low income households are also less able to compete for housing, and are generally less able to recover financially.⁸

Recovery post-disaster is also about resilience. Resilience takes many forms; emotional, physical and economic, but in general those who were most vulnerable before a natural disaster remain the most vulnerable in its aftermath.

In the period immediately after the earthquakes social and community organisations in Christchurch reported steep increases in demand for their services. This was expected, and central government (as well as agencies such as Red Cross) provided temporary additional financial support to help organisations meet the increased demand for services. For many agencies, however, the increased demand for their services has not abated or returned to pre-earthquake levels.

Aviva (formerly Christchurch Women's Refuge), for example, reported a 50% increase in requests for their family violence services after February 2011, but significantly, demand for the services they provide have remained at this increased level ever since. In addition, the continued lack of affordable rental accommodation in the city has both doubled the time people are staying in Aviva's residential accommodation, and led to men breaking orders and returning to the family home. Aviva report that the usual housing solutions for men required to leave the family home because of violence – motels, shelters – are all full to capacity, making it more likely men will break a protection or police safety order and try to move back home.

The Christchurch City Mission reports a similar sustained demand for their food bank, night shelter and drug and alcohol services. As with Aviva there was an immediate and sharp increase in demand

⁷ Gould, Charles, W (2009) "The Right to Housing recovery after natural disasters" <http://harvardhrj.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/gould.pdf>

⁸ Morrow B H, (1999) "Identifying and Mapping Community Vulnerability" *Disasters* 1999 23(1) 1-18

after the earthquakes but rent increases and other housing problems have meant this demand has not eased. In addition, the Mission and other similar organisations are assisting people who have never accessed their services before. This new group of people tend to be both property owners and employed, but whose financial resources have been stretched by paying both rent and mortgage payments while they wait for damaged houses to be repaired, and whose emotional resources are at a similarly low ebb.

In the initial period after the earthquakes, the Government provided additional assistance to social and community organisations, and to people and families on benefits. Although the after-effects of the earthquake continue, much of this assistance does not. Welfare reforms introduced last year and requiring parents of young children to be available for work came into effect in post-quake Christchurch too.

Housing

As above, (in)security of housing plays an important role in a child's experiences both immediately after an earthquake and in the recovery period. Long-term problems, be they emotional, behavioural, physical or psychological, are more likely to be seen amongst children who have lost their house and/or possessions as a result of the disaster. Being able to restore a child's "home", even if this is a different home, helps re-establish a child's sense of security and normalcy. (This doesn't apply just to children; recovery of housing is considered crucial to the recovery of a community as a whole⁹.)

As a direct result of the Canterbury earthquakes it is estimated that 7860 houses were classified as uninhabitable because of their location (the "red zone") and a further 9,100 properties were uninhabitable because they required either major repairs or to be rebuilt. In all, even with the building of new housing and rebuilding of existing homes, it is estimated that Christchurch's housing stock reduced by over 6% between September 2010 and December 2012.¹⁰

Inevitably some of the lost housing stock was rental housing. This, plus the entry of new renters needing housing after the permanent or temporary loss of their home, has led to a sharp increase in the demand for rental housing and significant increases in rents. A Housing Report completed by the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment in March this year found that average weekly rents in Christchurch increased 31% between August 2010 (just before the first earthquake) and February 2013. As a comparison, average weekly rents in Auckland increased by 13% in the same period. (More recently, figures released by Trade Me Property found that advertised rents for Canterbury rental properties were on average 25% higher than the previous year, and that for the first time ever, advertised rents for Christchurch properties were highest in New Zealand.)

As with any other city in New Zealand the majority of renters in Christchurch are low-income earners.¹¹ The MBIE report found that although there was an overall loss of rental properties, there was a particular decrease in the availability of "low-rent" properties, and noted that this made it likely that

⁹ Gould, C (2009) *ibid*

¹⁰ "Housing Pressures in Christchurch: A summary of the evidence" (2013) Ministry of Business Innovation and Employment

¹¹ A recent survey by the Christchurch Tenant's Protection Association found that 52.7% of the tenants they surveyed had an annual income of less than \$35,000.

many low-income residents face increased financial hardship and housing insecurity.

A recent survey by the Christchurch Tenants Protection Association supports this conclusion. They found the decline in the supply of adequate rental properties, and large rent increases have led not only to more than half of those tenants surveyed paying more than 40% of their income in rent, but more than 60% living in rental accommodation are yet to have earthquake damage repaired. Some damage to rental properties is minor but many tenants reported living in rental accommodation with, for example, leaking roofs, gaps around windows and external doors, and liquefaction under the house causing dampness and mould. (It is important to note here that there are many home-owners who have also suffered through their third winter in earthquake damaged homes with similar problems. Rapidly rising rents and scarcity of rental housing make renters particularly vulnerable.)

The cost and unavailability of affordable rental housing have also led to overcrowding, which together with the condition of many houses has led to an increase in poverty-related illnesses in children. Health practices and hospitals have seen this year an increase in conditions such as scabies, impetigo, asthma and head lice; all conditions linked to poverty and over-crowded living conditions.

It is difficult to see how the situation in Christchurch for low-income renters can improve, at least in the short-term. Demand for rental accommodation continues to be fuelled by home-owners needing temporary accommodation (usually for a period of several months) while their earthquake damaged houses are repaired. These “new” renters entering the rental market are attractive to landlords; they are not only desperate, but their rent is generally paid for by their insurance company. It is easy to see why the most vulnerable are the inevitable losers.

One of the young people who participated in the Press feature mentioned at the beginning of this paper chose to write about her family’s housing experiences post-earthquake. She is 12, and provides the following example of one child’s experience of housing insecurity after the earthquake:

"Me and my family have been struggling to find a permanent house to live in. First we started in Addington, where we had to move out of so we went to a friend's house and stayed in their garage. So we decided to go and stay in a sleep out.

It was all good but then it went wrong. So me and my mum and my sisters stayed at another friend's house while our dad hired a caravan in Spencer Park. It was fine for him, but when we arrived we got really cramped so Mum hired another caravan in Spencer Park. Perfection was here! Except when we needed to have a shower or watch TV, because we had to run across the field even when it was raining. And we had to run across the camp site to go to the toilet. Mum suggested we go round the back of the caravan but there were insects so no-one wanted to do that.

In the end we got a real house to live in but there's still one wish. I wish we get to live in the house forever because I'm sick of having to move house to house all the time".

Schools

After a traumatic event, such as the Canterbury earthquakes, schools play an important role in a child's recovery. Children tend to look to the adults in their lives, their parents, caregivers and teachers, for guidance on how to manage their reactions, and a child's recovery will be assisted if their school can continue to provide a stable and familiar environment.

Conversely, as with the permanent or temporary loss of the family home, long-term problems after a natural disaster are more likely to be seen in children whose schools are unable to return to "normal" and who have to, for example, relocate or introduce timetable or programme changes as a result.

This became the reality for several schools after the February 2011 earthquakes. A number of schools in the central city were unable to reopen either because they were located in the cordoned off central "red-zone", or because they suffered significant building and land damage. To ensure children could get back to school and learning as soon as possible, "co-location" arrangements were introduced to enable affected schools to continue to operate.

Two different types of arrangements were introduced; "site-sharing" and "shift-sharing". Under site-sharing arrangements, two schools (or in one case, three schools) operated on a single site. Schools that were shift-sharing, again operated on a single site but the school day was compressed and split between the "host school" and the "guest school". The host schools started an hour earlier and operated on the school site in the morning, and the guest schools operated in the afternoon, finishing the school day two hours later.

In an evaluation of the co-location arrangements¹², that operated for the remainder of the 2011 school year (and in a small number of cases for part of 2012), many of the students, parents and staff surveyed reported additional stress during the co-location period. The evaluation found that co-location was a compounding rather than a causative stress factor, but nevertheless for those already experiencing housing insecurity and other earthquake-related problems this is still significant. Some parents and students at "guest schools" operating in afternoons reported that their personal finances were negatively affected by the co-location. In most cases this was due to increased transport costs and, for students, the loss of after-school jobs. It is likely that this was particularly difficult for those on limited incomes. In short, the report found that although not ideal educationally, nor ideal in a number of other respects, co-location was a workable option for maintaining schooling after a significant event.

For many Christchurch children however the disruption to school did not end when the co-location arrangements ended. At the beginning of 2013 the Minister of Education announced, as part of the Government's Education Renewal Plan, interim decisions concerning the closure or merger of a number of Christchurch schools. Final decisions about most of the schools have since been announced; from 2014 seven schools will close and six other schools will be merged into three. In addition three primary schools and one high school will be merged to create a new "super school" open to students from Year 1 – 13 in 2017.

¹² Ham V, Cathro G, Winter M, Winter J (2012) "Evaluative study of co-located schools established following the Christchurch earthquake" www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/schooling/115174

Some of the affected schools have very small rolls, others had sustained damage to buildings and land, and there is no doubt that the earthquakes have changed the shape of many Christchurch suburbs and populations. It is possible to argue that some of the announced changes were at some point inevitable. This fails to take into account however the needs of the children at the affected schools.

In a secular society schools frequently represent the heart or centre of a community; in the absence of a shared religion they become an important place of gathering. And, even under normal circumstances, children form significant emotional attachments to their school. In post-earthquake Christchurch both of these roles were and continue to be enhanced.

A child's recovery from a traumatic event is assisted if their school is able to provide a stable and familiar environment. Closing schools attended by children who are living in a damaged environment, who may still be living in temporary or damaged accommodation, and who may still be experiencing physical and emotional symptoms as a result of the earthquake and its aftermath, simply makes no sense. Allowing those children and communities to recover in peace, on the other hand, does.

Conclusion

It is not the purpose of this paper to provide a general criticism of the Government's response to the Canterbury earthquakes. The work required to rebuild and repair this city is of a scale so vast that it can be carried out only in partnership between central and local government, and the people who live here. Whether or not there are appropriate structures and processes in place to achieve this is beyond the scope of this paper.

What the government may be failing to do is to keep the earthquakes and the lasting effects of the quakes on the people who live here, at the forefront of all government decisions that either directly or indirectly affect the city and its people. For example, is it not appropriate to require parents receiving a benefit to be available for work, without first asking about, and then addressing the post-quake needs and circumstances of the children of that family.

The Government's Education Renewal Plan led to the closure and merger of several Christchurch schools at a most difficult time for families. The learning from our experience is that consideration must be given to allow damaged communities a breathing space before introducing further change.

In particular, Child Poverty Action Group calls on policy makers and government to respect Article 3(1) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child that provides that the best interests of the child is to be a primary consideration in all actions concerning children.