

# Wildfire evacuations: How our diverse experiences can strengthen disaster response

July 21 2023, by Maureen G. Reed, Amber J. Fletcher and Heidi Walker



Tina Elliott, an MES student at the University of Saskatchewan, worked with residents of Wadin Bay, Saskatchewan's first FireSmart community, to develop a guidebook for learning and adaptation following the major wildfires in northern Saskatchewan in 2015. Credit: Tina Elliott, Author provided

Wildfire affects us all differently. This is the central message from

research about the social dimensions of climate hazards.

[Considerable research](#) has calculated potential land area burned, counted the dollars spent in evacuation and recovery and proposed technical and [infrastructural adaptation](#) measures to cope with longer and more intense fire seasons.

However, less attention has been paid to how different groups of people are affected and the intangible social losses they experience.

As researchers working on gender, diversity and environment, we believe that to effectively address climate hazards like [wildfire](#), we must consider the diverse experiences of people. We must also account for longstanding "taken for granted" institutions and create processes that empower local people to plan, respond and learn from their specific experiences.

## **The diverse experiences of wildfire**

Over the past decade, we have conducted multiple projects in the boreal region of western Canada to learn how residents experience and plan for wildfire.

While governments and the [media tend to focus on the economic losses of wildfire](#), [community residents](#) tend to focus on losses associated with mental and emotional well-being, social exclusions and the grief they experience from changes to the places and landscapes they love.

Even within [small communities](#), [such effects vary considerably](#) according to peoples' gender, socio-economic status, Indigenous identity, age, their social networks and other characteristics. [And many of these characteristics intersect with one another](#), resulting in diverse experiences of wildfire.

[Our research](#), for instance, provided examples of Indigenous women with [young children](#) worrying that their children would be taken away during evacuations if they did not "behave."

In other instances, men felt pressure to stay and fight the fires to protect their assets, despite the health and safety risks. Meanwhile [community members](#) were worried about how the fires would affect their sense of belonging to a place.

Other studies have similarly shown that people experience wildfire differently at various intersections of, for example, [rural identity and gender](#), [youth or age and Indigeneity](#) and [affluence and physical mobility](#)

.

These differences are influenced by the [social institutions](#) that shape our experiences, such as colonial legacies and gendered norms and expectations.

In the above example, the women's experiences of anxiety were influenced by legacies of harmful assimilative practices of residential schools and the Sixties Scoop, which [forcibly removed Indigenous children from their families](#). This in addition to the ongoing inequalities and injustices that see [Indigenous children over-represented in foster systems](#).

Masculine norms and expectations to be community protectors also often influence men's decisions to "stay and fight" during the event and [create barriers to their willingness to access mental health assistance afterwards](#)

.

## **Institutions can help or hinder**

Institutions we take for granted can exacerbate the secondary risks

people face from wildfire events.

Top-down, command-and-control approaches to emergency management are often very effective in getting people out of immediate harm's way when wildfires draw near. But evacuation triage processes that [prioritize physical health risks may result in the fragmentation of extended family support networks](#).

Realizing these gaps, Indigenous residents and their governments have often taken the initiative to offer culturally appropriate and timely provision of food, supplies, temporary residences and social supports for evacuees in addition to fighting the fires.

The "[Rez Cross](#)," hosted by Beardy's and Okemasis First Nation in Saskatchewan in 2015, is but one example.

While people are impacted by wildfire and evacuations in different ways, community members also have important knowledge—including information about the land, [social context](#), cultural protocols, and local values—which is critical during and after wildfires and other extreme events.

In our studies, when residents spoke about the need to rebuild their communities, they meant much more than the physical bricks and mortar, calling for projects that demonstrate care for one another and learn from the past.

Learning from these experiences, we are now engaging in research that supports local people from diverse situations [to work together to share experiences and knowledge related to wildfire impacts](#) and [to co-design effective local strategies](#).

This is hopeful work.

## Working together builds resilience

Addressing climate change and climate hazards requires governments, community-based organizations and even private sector entities at all levels to fund and [support communities](#).

This will help communities plan and adapt in ways that account for diversity of experience, address underlying social inequalities and draw on local strengths and knowledge.

An inclusive approach involves meaningful engagement processes with diverse groups of people within communities, facilitated by robust funding and [social infrastructure](#), alongside a re-thinking of institutions or "rules in use" that are taken for granted.

By accounting for social dimensions in each of these contexts, we can help empower communities to leverage local innovation and strengthen their resilience in the face of climate hazards.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Wildfire evacuations: How our diverse experiences can strengthen disaster response (2023, July 21) retrieved 30 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-07-wildfire-evacuations-diverse-disaster-response.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.