

# Where is social work in emergency management? Exploring visibility in New Zealand online media

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## Abstract

*Registered social workers in New Zealand have transferable skills and capabilities that enable them to work with diverse populations at levels including the individual, family and community. Working across government and non-government organisations, they are well-situated to effectively contribute to emergency management. Despite this, their current engagement in emergency management is largely invisible even though, anecdotally, it is known that many social workers have been active in this field. In the main, public understanding of social workers is limited and they are frequently portrayed by the media in negative terms, with an emphasis on critical incidents such as child deaths. This limited reporting of the breadth and depth of the knowledge and skills of social workers may affect credibility, perception and uptake. Consequently, media portrayals may limit other professionals' engagement with them in the planning and mitigation phases of emergency management, in particular. Further, the public may be reluctant to seek or accept social workers' professional support during and after an emergency. This article presents the results of a content analysis of New Zealand online media depictions of social work and emergencies over the past ten years. The findings illustrate the minimal visibility of social work and emergencies in New Zealand media. Social work representations are largely focused on the profession having a role in addressing ongoing psychosocial needs in the mid- and longer-term recovery phases.*

*Recommendations include increasing positive media profiling of social workers and illuminating the broad scope of their practice. Enhancing current relationships between the social work profession and the emergency management sector will also lead to more positive well-being outcomes for individuals, families, and communities in New Zealand.*

**Keywords:** *Social work; disaster, emergency management, media, New Zealand*

According to Bisman (2004) and the Aotearoa New Zealand Association for Social Workers (ANZASW) (2013), *social work* is founded on the values of human rights, social justice, advocacy, social change and empowerment. As a profession, it seeks to ameliorate personal, social, community and global challenges (ANZASW, 2013; Bisman, 2004). The practice of *social workers* is underpinned by The Global Agenda for Social Work. This agenda was written by the International Association of Schools of Social Work, the International Council on Social Welfare and the International Federation of Social Workers, and recognises that “people’s health and wellbeing suffer as a result of inequalities and unsustainable environments related to climate change, pollutants, war, natural disasters and violence” (IASSW, ICSW, & IFSW, 2012, p.1). The Global Definition of Social Work, by the IASSW and the IFSW (2014) highlights that it is both a practice-based and academic discipline that focuses on the well-being and liberation of people, especially those who may be disadvantaged or marginalised.

In New Zealand, registered social workers are employed in a range of fields of practice including government, non-government, *iwi* and other indigenous Māori groups and organisations (Hay, Dale & Cooper, 2016), where *iwi* refers to Māori tribal groups. They draw on a diversity of knowledge bases in their practice, for example, a strengths perspective, indigenous methods, community and social development, resilience, sustainable development, preventive and early intervention work, and solutions-focused interventions (Drolet et al., 2015; Hollis-English, 2015; Tiong Tan & Yuen, 2013). Social workers engage with people across the life-span and have the analytical skills, knowledge and capabilities to work alongside individuals, families, *whānau* and

communities (Hay et al., 2016), where *whānau* is a Māori term referring to family and family-like groups. Practising in diverse settings including schools, hospitals, non-government organisations, prisons, iwi social services and government agencies, social workers are often engaged with the most vulnerable members of society and must be responsive to changing social problems, shifting demographics, as well as new legislation and policy (Dominelli, 2010; Kamerman, 2002; Marlowe, 2014). Social workers therefore tend to be flexible and adaptable in their work across myriad practice and policy domains.

There are currently over 7,500 registered social workers in New Zealand (Social Workers Registration Board, 2017). Several other titles may be used to describe a person who is practising social work. These may include, but are not limited to, *human service worker*, *community worker*, *youth worker*, and even *counsellor* (van Heugten, 2001). These terms can create confusion as to who a social worker is, what qualification they may hold, whether they are registered and, more simply, what they do in their professional role. The nomenclature of Social Worker is not a protected title in New Zealand, although this is likely to change when registration becomes mandatory. Draft legislation affirming this change is currently before a parliamentary select committee. For the purposes of the current article, the term social worker refers to a person who is registered with the New Zealand Social Workers Registration Board.

Social work practice does not appear to be well understood by the New Zealand public where media exposure tends to focus on negative critical incidents such as child deaths (Beddoe, 2014; Stanfield & Beddoe, 2013; Keenan, 2000). The media plays an important role in informing and educating the public and can significantly influence public perception and credibility of individuals and organisations (Motion & Weaver, 2005; Stanfield & Beddoe, 2013). Negative, stereotypical and inaccurate media reporting on the professional role of social workers may therefore undermine public confidence in the profession while limiting understandings of the role and effectiveness of social workers (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2017). Writing from a United Kingdom context but reflective of the New Zealand situation, Dominelli (2010, p.2) suggested that:

... the public is unaware of what social workers do ...  
Nor does the general public know about practitioners' heroic and innovative interventions in some of the most horrendous situations brought about through

natural and (hu)man-made disasters, where they are among the many professionals who provide emergency relief responses.

In New Zealand, multiple professions are active across the four phases of emergency management: reduction, readiness, response and recovery (Ministry of Civil Defence and Emergency Management, 2015). In the past decade, and particularly following the Christchurch earthquakes in 2010 and 2011, social work practice and its connection with emergency management have received increased attention in the social work literature (for example: Adamson, 2014; Hunt, Sargisson, Hamerton, & Smith, 2014; van Heugten, 2013, 2014). This mirrors scholarly developments in Australia (For example: Cooper & Briggs, 2014; Du Plooy, Harms, Muir, Martin, & Ingliss, 2014; Pack, 2014; Pease, 2014; Shevellar & Westoby, 2014). Australasian literature on social work and emergencies (Adamson, 2014; Cooper & Briggs, 2014; Pack, 2014; Pease, 2014) has emphasised the importance of incorporating disaster knowledge and skills within the tertiary social work curriculum so that graduates may be better prepared for responding to emergencies. Using real or simulated disasters to support student learning with a focus on issues for specific populations, for example men and volunteers, has also been examined (Hunt et al., 2014; Pack, 2014; Pease, 2014). After the Rena oil spill in New Zealand, it was suggested that "...social workers will be one of the groups expected to respond to community need in a climate of increasing environmental and technological disasters..." (Hunt et al., 2014, p.43). The sum of these publications represents a growing view that social workers should be actively involved in emergency management.

Interestingly, and in comparison, Australasian disaster/emergency management publications have given little visibility to the role and contribution of social workers in emergencies (Cooper & Briggs, 2014; Whelan, 1998; Winkworth, Healy, Woodward, & Camilleri, 2009). Perhaps this has been worsened by the fairly ambiguous terms mentioned above, such as human service worker, which could include but does not specifically name social workers. Following the Christchurch earthquakes, research into the work of, and impact on, certain human service professionals, namely general practitioners and nurses, was conducted by Johal and Mounsey (2015), Johal, Mounsey, Brannelly and Johnston (2016) and Johal, Mounsey, Tuohy and Johnston (2014). The importance of caring for these health professionals

has also been examined, by Huggard (2011). However, this body of literature appears to lack a specific focus on social workers and their practice in emergency management, and also a focus on the broader role of social work professionals in the same field (Johal et al., 2016).

Given their professional role, it follows that social workers' contributions during each phase of an emergency can be significant. Given an apparent paucity of research in both the domains of media portrayals of social workers and their role in emergencies, there is considerable scope to further examine understandings of the current and potential involvement of the social work profession. As an initial step to address this gap in knowledge, the current research identified how social work and social workers have been portrayed by New Zealand online media, concerning emergency responses over the preceding 10 years.

## Method

A process of content analysis was employed to examine how social work, social workers and emergencies were portrayed in the New Zealand online media between 2006 and 2016. Content analysis was pertinent because it enabled the study and consideration of both the content and context of qualitative data through a process of systematic inquiry (Rubin & Babbie, 2016; Shuker, 2003; Spencer, Ritchie, Ormston, O'Connor, & Barnard, 2014). The chosen method included the analysis of both *manifest content*, in which the frequency of a term was quantified, and *latent content*, through which underlying meanings could be identified (Rubin & Babbie, 2016).

Sampling was undertaken once a research notification had been placed on the Massey University Low-Risk Ethics register. The sampling process involved locating relevant online news items produced from January 1<sup>st</sup> 2006 to December 31<sup>st</sup> 2016 that used the search term "social work\*" and also one of the following words related to disasters or emergencies:

- 1) Emergency
- 2) Emergency management
- 3) Emergency response
- 4) Natural disaster
- 5) Man-made disaster
- 6) Earthquake
- 7) Emergency work
- 8) Disaster
- 9) Disaster worker

- 10) Pike river mine
- 11) Rena oil spill
- 12) Mangatepopo
- 13) Carterton balloon

The research was conducted across the three national online media sites: Stuff ([www.stuff.co.nz](http://www.stuff.co.nz)), the New Zealand Herald ([www.nzherald.co.nz](http://www.nzherald.co.nz)), and Radio New Zealand ([www.rnz.co.nz](http://www.rnz.co.nz)).

Retrieved articles were then numbered for ease of reference during and following coding. Once the articles were categorised according to identified themes, analysis of the latent and manifest content was conducted. This process involved an initial analysis by the second author and then review and auditing by the first author. The results of this analysis are outlined below.

## Findings

The content analysis identified only 18 relevant articles published from 2006 to 2016. The terms in question were used a total of 32 times. Only one article contained the term social worker in the title: Social workers still helping out in Christchurch (Kinealy, 2011). Additionally, Kinealy (2011) was the only article focused solely on contributions from the social work profession during an emergency. Over 75 percent of the relevant articles referred to social work no more than once.

Fourteen of the articles were identified by searching for: "social work" AND "earthquake". Two were identified by searching for: "social work" AND "emergency". Two more were identified by searching for: "social work" AND "natural disaster". All 18 articles were written in relation to the Christchurch earthquakes that occurred on the September 4<sup>th</sup> 2010 and the February 22<sup>nd</sup> 2011. This is significant because other emergencies, such as the Mangatepopo Gorge tragedy (2008), the Carterton balloon crash (2012), the Pike River Mine disaster (2010), the Kaikoura earthquake (2016) and the Rena oil spill (2011), were also included in the search terms. However, relevant articles were not found. Media coverage might have been influenced by the magnitude of the event and number of people affected, where the Christchurch earthquakes (of 2010 and 2011) were the largest emergencies to impact New Zealand in the given time-frame, with the second quake associated with the loss of 185 lives. Five themes were generated from the latent analysis of relevant press coverage, as outlined below.

### **Social worker responses and increasing demand for services**

A relationship between the ongoing needs of individuals and communities following the earthquakes, and social workers and their practice was noted in 10 of the 18 articles. All 18 articles signalled that social work was involved in some way, as part of the mid- to longer-term response and recovery efforts. Ongoing and often complex needs were linked to an increasing demand for social work services. These needs also highlighted the importance of advocacy for specific client groups with whom social workers have frequently been engaged.

Following the two major earthquakes, there was an identified need within the health sector to increase support for social workers in Christchurch. Social workers from Counties Manukau District Health Board had been sent to Christchurch in the “early weeks” after the 2011 earthquake, and then continued to work on rotation with the primary purpose being “to give relief for social work staff” (Kinealy, 2011, para. 6).

More than a year after the second earthquake, clinical social work specialist Suzanne Edmonds publicly advocated, via online media, for increased awareness of elder abuse in the community. She identified an increase in referrals for elder abuse since the earthquakes and called for a collaborative approach to address this abuse (Matthewson, 2012).

Another 2012 article profiled the increased demand for social work services from the Salvation Army, not only in Christchurch, but also in other regions to which people were relocating. Interestingly, the Salvation Army spokesperson noted that some of this demand for social work support was coming from middle income earners; a different demographic to clients supported prior to the earthquakes (Bayer, 2012).

At the end of 2012, Radio New Zealand reported that the needs of social service agencies, that had been working in very difficult and constrained environments, had been overlooked. Christchurch City Missioner, Michael Gorman, reported a considerable increase in demand for social work support as well as for other services such as foodbanks and counselling (RNZ, 2012).

Two years after the 2011 earthquake, on-going earthquake-related challenges were linked to needs for social work support (Turner, 2013). An increase in family violence post-earthquakes had led to a shortage of suitable short-term accommodation for male perpetrators. It was highlighted how social work support

was needed to address this increasing concern. Around this time, Wood (2013) highlighted how social work was one profession with a considerable increase in jobs within the Canterbury region. This trend in increased social work jobs appeared to continue in the short term. In 2014, Radio New Zealand highlighted that the Red Cross Earthquake Commission would be funding six more social work positions in Canterbury schools to assist students who continued to be affected by the earthquakes (RNZ, 2014).

In an article on regeneration, published in February 2016, Matthews interviewed the newly appointed Chair of Regenerate Christchurch, André Lovatt. Focusing on social, environmental and commercial outcomes, Lovatt emphasised that even after six years, “the social work needs in the city are huge” and that many of the children who experienced the quakes continued to have ongoing academic and developmental needs (Matthews, 2016, para. 30). Similarly, in two 2016 articles, a social work student and school principals respectively and clearly stated that challenges arising from the earthquakes were ongoing. One school had employed social workers due to rising student anxiety and an increase in children struggling with mental health issues (Murphy, 2016). The social work student reported a substantial need for long-term mental health funding for all age-groups (Campbell, 2016). This relates to the second theme identified through our analysis, funding.

### **Funding**

Funding associated with social workers or social work service delivery was mentioned in four articles. The distribution of funding through the prime minister’s earthquake fund was the focus of an article by Gates (2012). Almost one third of three-million-dollar grant was distributed to various social services. However, only one social service specified that the funds received would go towards increasing social work services, specifically home-based social work. The other named social services indicated client populations they would be seeking to support with the funding. However, they made no specific mention of social workers or social work practice.

Bayer (2012) reported on the annual Salvation Army annual appeal. This article indicated that the demand for social work services had significantly increased and that funding was therefore required to maintain similar levels of service delivery. RNZ (2014) outlined the allocation of funding from the Red Cross’s Earthquake Commission

which included appointing six social workers to support high-need primary and intermediate school students. Interestingly, this same article indicated that 33 youth workers would also be employed to work in intermediate and secondary schools.

As mentioned above, five years after the 2011 Christchurch earthquake, the media spoke with a current social work student. This student advocated for long-term funding to meet the mental health needs of the community, which he described as “not really going away” (Campbell, 2016, para. 11).

### **Research and social work students**

The theme of research and social work students was evident in four articles. Lynn (2016) reported on how a social work student had been engaged in an international study of how children make sense of their disaster experiences.

The findings from a research project by Aviva, formerly the Christchurch Women’s Refuge, led to a decision to consider a range of options for increasing temporary accommodation for men who were required to leave their homes due to family violence. One of the options considered was short-term accommodation with associated social work support (Turner, 2013).

Two articles incorporated comments from social work students. Several student volunteers were interviewed about their volunteering experiences five years after the first earthquake. For one volunteer, the experience of assisting others had made her realise the importance of contributing to meeting community needs and these experiences reportedly influenced her decision to pursue postgraduate studies in social work (O’Callaghan, 2015). Another post-graduate social work student was interviewed as part of a media series focusing on the diverse lives of people in the Canterbury community. This student emphasised the ongoing challenges for many people living in the post-earthquake context (Campbell, 2016).

### **Perceptions of social workers and their practice**

Respect for, and acknowledgement of, specific social workers or organisations was evident in three of the articles. In 2010, the appointment of Arihia Bennett (MNZM) to the Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Commission was announced while publicly acknowledging her “extensive experience in social work” (NZPA, 2010, para. 12). In 2012, the Christchurch Methodist Mission was presented with an award to

recognise their delivery of social work services following the earthquakes (Hargreaves, 2012). A more recent article expressed appreciation for the contribution of Christchurch City Missioner, Michael Gorman. With extensive experience as both a social worker and priest, the article highlighted his service to the community and efforts in leading the Mission’s response to the Christchurch earthquakes (Fletcher, 2016).

The earliest reference to social work was published 20 weeks after the first Christchurch earthquake (McGregor, 2011) and had the only overtly negative comment about social work and social workers. This article stated that the manager of the Kaiapoi Earthquake Support Services “bristles at the terms such as ‘case worker’ and ‘client’, because they are too redolent of social work” (McGregor, 2011, para. 2). The article constituted a message that this manager did not want her team to be perceived as social workers, for fear that this would deter people from accessing support (McGregor, 2011).

### **Social workers as human beings**

Three articles conveyed the message that social workers are not super-human but people who have lived experiences, who make mistakes, and who also need to be mindful of their own self-care (Fletcher, 2016). This was emphasised by an Allied Health director, who outlined that the primary purpose for sending additional social workers from Auckland to Christchurch was to reduce the workload for social work staff who were continuing to provide services “while living through the situation themselves” (Kinealy, 2011, para. 5).

Dr Kate van Heugten, a social work academic from Christchurch, further developed this theme when discussing her book: *Social Work under Pressure*, which focuses on social service worker burnout and fatigue in times of high stress and anxiety. She emphasised how people will initially survive a disaster on adrenaline, but that social workers and other social service workers must look after themselves in order to assist others (The Press, 2011).

## **Discussion**

The results outlined above suggest that social workers and their emergency-related practice remain largely invisible in New Zealand’s online media. This invisibility continues to limit the public’s understanding of the profession’s involvement in all four phases of emergency management (Stanfield & Beddoe, 2013). The focus of the majority of articles indicates that the media’s

perception of, and interest in, social workers mainly relates to the longer-term recovery phase. This may explain why there were no articles concerning social work and the Kaikoura earthquake, which occurred at the end of the 2006 to 2016 sample time frame, in November 2016. While social work is valuable in long-term recovery efforts, it could nonetheless also contribute to planning and reduction phases, given its focus on smaller scale and large scale social issues (Briggs & Heisenfelt Roark, 2013).

As outlined by Hay et al. (2016), social workers are employed in a range of organisations. However, it is of note that social work in government organisations was not mentioned by any of the identified articles. This is surprising, given that the Ministry for Children Oranga Tamariki and district health boards are the largest employers of social workers in New Zealand; furthermore, given that these organisations have a significant role in welfare aspects of emergency management (Ministry of Civil Defence and Emergency Management, 2015). Media coverage of these organisations could therefore be reasonably expected. It is also noteworthy that social workers in iwi/Māori organisations were similarly invisible, despite being significant providers of social work services (Hollis-English, 2015).

The limited mention of social work in the media may reflect the wider public's understanding of social worker roles. Journalists, as members of the wider public, may also be unaware of the range of activity where social workers are engaged. Media coverage of social work practice has tended to focus on negative social work outcomes and while these stories may be more considered more newsworthy, they present the public with a one-sided and often poor view of how social workers can effectively work with people to improve their well-being (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2017; Stanfield & Beddoe, 2014). As outlined by Motion and Weaver (2005), positively profiling individual social workers and organisations prior to future emergencies may therefore help to increase both public confidence and the credibility of social work engagement and intervention.

Christchurch has over 580 registered social workers and is the location of New Zealand's social work professional body, the ANZASW. Consequently, there is a strong presence of social workers in the region. It could be expected that this would lead to greater media visibility. However, this strong presence now raises questions about both the visibility of this professional organisation and its media relationships because no press releases

or interviews with the Chief Executive or prominent members of the Association were identified in the current research. Through developing stronger relationships with journalists, the ANZASW could further increase public understanding of social work practice (Stanfield & Beddoe, 2013). This could also help to raise the profile and inclusion of the social work profession as an important part of emergency and disaster management.

Relationships between the social work profession and the emergency management sector, including the Ministry of Civil Defence and Emergency Management, also warrant further exploration. It is possible that people working in this sector have a limited understanding of the professional role played by social workers and how they can effectively contribute in all four phases of emergency management. In addition to further research in this area, awareness-raising activities could include brief presentations, resources such as flashcards, photos and information in existing toolboxes, such as the toolbox at [www.civildefence.govt.nz/](http://www.civildefence.govt.nz/), provided by Auckland Council (2014).

## Conclusion

Social workers have considerable and transferable capabilities. Their specialist practice skills enable them to advocate, support and empower change in people, families, whānau and communities. They are trained to work with diverse populations across the life-span. Situated in myriad organisations and in both rural and urban locations, they are well-positioned to play a significant role in all four phases of emergency management in New Zealand.

However, the current positioning of social workers in this field appears to be poorly understood and requires further research. Media coverage of how social workers have been involved in New Zealand emergencies has been minimal and has primarily focused on longer-term recovery.

In summary, a two-pronged approach to improve social work visibility and the value of social worker involvement in emergency management is required. Firstly, positive media profiling will assist with improving the public's perception of the social work profession and thus increase confidence in social work contributions to response and recovery phases (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2017; Stanfield & Beddoe, 2013). Secondly, by enhancing how the emergency management sector understands the, often heroic, capabilities of social

workers (Dominelli, 2010), and the broad scope of their practice (Hay et al., 2016), social workers may be utilised more effectively across all four phases of emergency management.

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