

Impacts of Human and Natural Disasters: Experiences of Trauma by Individuals, Families, and Communities



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We are pleased to contribute to this editorial as the Graduate Student Co-Chairs, and former Graduate Scholars, of the Lillian Meighen Wright Maternal-Child Health Scholars Program at York University. As passionate advocates for maternal-child health and researchers committed to advancing the field, our respective doctoral work investigates critical early-life influences on children’s health and developmental outcomes. Specifically, we examine the effects of prenatal and early childhood exposure to environmental chemicals on maternal health and neurodevelopmental trajectories in children (Hall) and explore maternal-infant interactions in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, with a particular focus on responses to painful procedures in preterm infants (Hamwi).

This special issue of the INYI Journal features Attia Khan’s commentary on the 7th Lillian Meighen Wright Maternal-Child Health Learning Academy: Impacts of Natural Disasters on Maternal-Child Health, held on July 15 and 17, 2024. We had the privilege of serving on the event’s planning committee. The primary aim of this two-day academy was to foster collaborative learning and critical dialogue on maternal-child health and well-being in the context of natural disasters, a pressing and increasingly relevant issue. The event brought together scholars, students, practitioners,

and community members to explore the intersections of research, practice, and policy. The program featured panel discussions, poster presentations, and expert commentary, with contributions from both international and local participants. Topics addressed included the impacts of natural and human-made disasters on child development, youth and families, racialized populations, and rural and coastal communities. Attia Khan, a post-doctoral fellow at York University, provides a rich overview of this Learning Academy in her commentary, discussing how the event underscored the urgent need for intersectional, community-informed, and climate-resilient maternal-child health strategies.

For further details, including the biographies, abstracts, and a video summary of the 7th Annual Lillian Meighen Wright Maternal-Child Health Learning Academy, please visit the following websites:

Handbook:

<https://nkhanlou.info.yorku.ca/files/2024/07/Booklet-LMW-7th-Learning-Academy-July-2024.pdf?x11491>

Video: <https://youtu.be/XX-cFyiAG6c>

Other works in this special issue include four articles. The first research article featured is by Ayuk Nyakpo Orock from the Department of Social Work from Czech Republic, and colleagues from Sri Lanka, Switzerland and the United States. Orock and colleagues present a comparative literature review of child protection systems in four sub-Saharan African countries: Seychelles, Ghana, Kenya, and Sierra Leone. The study explored how colonial legacies and inherited Anglo-Saxon child welfare models shape current child protection practices. While all four countries have established legal frameworks and centralized, state-led approaches to child protection, the authors highlight key systemic challenges including the limited discretion, flexibility, and autonomy for social workers. The findings underscore the need for policy changes that empower

practitioners to exercise professional judgment and adapt services to the local context and the best interests of the child.

The second research article featured in the issue is from Fiona Edwards, of the School of Social Work at MacEwan University. Edwards investigated the mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Afro-Caribbean Canadian youth (ACCY) aged 16 to 18 in urban southern Ontario. Using interpretative phenomenological analysis, based on interviews with six youth, the study identified three key themes: loneliness and isolation, growing self-awareness, and heightened awareness of systemic anti-Black racism. The findings underscore how the pandemic, combined with ongoing racial inequities, shaped ACCY's mental health experiences, and highlight the need for more responsive and equitable mental health services.

The third research article featured in the issue is from Joyce Kamanzi and colleagues from York University and "Africans in Partnership Against AIDS," a community-based, AIDS service organization serving African communities in Toronto. They conducted a qualitative study to explore the mental health experiences of African, Caribbean, and Black immigrant families living with HIV in the Greater Toronto Area. Through semi-structured interviews with 20 participants, the authors identified three key themes: HIV-related struggles (including stigma, shame, and neurocognitive impairment), systemic barriers (such as racism, discrimination, and housing challenges), and social network dynamics (including isolation and the dilemma of disclosure). The findings highlight how intersecting structural and social factors exacerbate mental health challenges in this population, underscoring the need to integrate mental health services into HIV care to improve health outcomes and reduce inequities.

The fourth research article is by Fiona Edwards of MacEwan University and colleague Amy Barlow from the Department of Politics at York University. The authors critically examined Ontario's "Ready, Set, Go" program, which aims to support youth transitioning out of care, where they may no longer have access to much needed services. While acknowledging the program's intent, the authors describe the current

approach as being rooted in Eurocentric, neoliberal frameworks and that it fails to address the structural inequities and mental health challenges faced by youth leaving care, particularly in the context of Toronto's housing crisis. Through a Social Justice and Health Equity lens, they advocate for an individualized, needs-based model of support that accounts for external factors (e.g., housing instability) and better reflects youth readiness to transition out of care.

The fifth article in this issue of INYI Journal features a thought-provoking commentary that expands our understanding of human-made and environmental crises as they intersect with racial justice and maternal-child health. The Authors, Donna Richards from the School of Social Work, Trent University, and Paul Adjei, from Indigenous Research-Bruneau Centre for Research and Innovation, Memorial University, reflect on the traumatic impact of witnessing George Floyd's murder. The authors describe how the event was not only as a moment of cultural awakening for many White observers but as a profoundly re-traumatizing experience for Black communities. Through personal narratives and professional insights, Richards and Adjei explore the emotional, psychological, and existential tolls of anti-Black racism and racialized state violence, particularly on Black youth. Their commentary calls for shifts in clinical and educational practice, grounded in racial Trauma-informed care and Black-led resistance.

Together, the articles in this issue illustrate how natural and human-made disasters, such as climate change, intersect with systemic racism and colonial legacies to disproportionately impact marginalized children, youth, and families. They call for equity-driven, community-informed approaches across research, practice, and policy to better support those most affected by crisis.

Guest Editors, INYI Journal

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<https://inyi.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/default/article/view/160>

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