Empowering youth in disaster recovery

When it comes to disaster recovery and resilience, Robin Cox believes youth are an untapped resource with the potential to act as powerful catalysts for change within their families and communities.

"A host of factors such as age, dependency and children and adolescents' marginalization in most decision making processes can put them at greater risk in disasters," says Cox, head of the Disaster and Emergency Management programs at Royal Roads. "However, these same children and youth have tremendous potential to contribute to their own disaster resilience and that of their communities through involvement in preparedness, risk communication, response and recovery activities."

Along with Colorado State University associate professor Lori Peek, Cox has launched one of the first major empirical studies to understand disaster recovery and youth. "We need evidence-based, child- and youth-centred approaches to disaster recovery models and policies, Cox suggests that a shift is required in how we research and build recovery models. "We need evidence-based, child- and youth-centred approaches to disaster recovery and risk-reduction if we are going to more effectively support children and ensure their safety," she says. "We need a clearer picture of how different domains of their lives – family relationships, peer relationships, educational outcomes, housing and neighbourhoods and overall quality of life – are affected by disaster and what specific resources and forms of social support they need to support their own recovery and that of their community."

To this end, Cox and Peek are seeking to contribute to the development of a child-centred socio-ecological theory of disaster recovery that will inform practice and also provide opportunities for youth in both communities to share their stories and insights with each other and with youth in other communities. While researching the 2003 McLure fire in B.C.'s North Thompson Valley, Cox observed how young people were often left out of recovery decisions and activities. She also heard from parents and teachers about how they struggled to provide adequate support to children in the midst of trying to rebuild their lives. On the opposite end, she has observed in other disasters, such as the 2010 earthquake in Canterbury, New Zealand, how young people can mobilize in amazing and creative ways if given a chance.

"Following the Canterbury earthquake, a group of young people used social media and their ability to self-organize to mobilize recovery teams. "It's a lovely example of the potential in involving children and youth," Cox says. "Disasters shatter people's sense of control and their everyday expectations about how the world will unfold. Taking action is not only a great coping strategy it also helps shape and strengthen the resilience of the community and all of society."