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Research article

Overlooked in the storm: How newcomers engage with hazards and are engaged in British Columbia

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Abstract

When the next storm hits or an earthquake strikes, will British Columbia's (BC) newest residents know what to do or where to turn? This article explores how newcomers navigate hazards in BC and how current disaster preparedness strategies systematically overlook them. It draws on reflective insights from the author's lived experience, engagement with newcomer communities, and policy expertise to highlight how unique experiences deter many newcomers from investing in preparedness or seeking hazard information. These unique experiences include uncertainty and limited access tied to temporary immigration status, and stigmatizing media and public narratives that blame newcomers for issues like housing unaffordability. Furthermore, institutional messaging and strategies often assume baseline knowledge of local risks, excluding those unfamiliar with BC's hazard landscape. Meanwhile, settlement services rarely include information on disaster preparedness, signalling that it is not an immediate concern. With newcomers underrepresented and not sufficiently empowered in disaster planning processes, policies often fail to reflect their lived realities. Rather than offering a simple call to inclusion, this article challenges dominant narratives and institutional blind spots, advocating for strategies that recognize and build on newcomers' strengths and agency. These insights also offer broader lessons for international policymakers navigating the intersecting challenges of equitable disaster risk management, climate adaptation, and engaging newcomer and migrant populations.

Keywords: Newcomers, Disaster Preparedness, British Columbia, Hazards and Risks, Immigrants.

Introduction

Every quarter, thousands of international migrants arrive in British Columbia (BC) to work, live, study, or seek asylum (BC Stats, 2025). BC is home to invaluable habitats and wetlands, vital natural resources, major industries, and a population of about 5.7 million people representing diverse cultures and heritages. These qualities make it a desirable destination for people around the world, many of whom settle in Metro Vancouver, Vancouver Island (particularly Nanaimo and Greater Victoria), and the Interior, including

Kamloops and Kelowna (NewToBC, 2024). However, the same factors that make BC attractive and give it a competitive advantage are increasingly at risk due to natural and climate-related hazards.

The province faces growing risks from floods, wildfires, extreme heat, drought, landslides, and earthquakes. These are now overseen by the new *Emergency and Disaster Management Act* (Province of British Columbia, 2023), which also requires that risk assessments and emergency plans address the needs of individuals who may experience intersectional disadvantage. These hazards, identified as provincial priorities by Milne et al. (2024), have become more frequent and severe in recent years. The 2023 wildfire season was the worst on record, burning over 2.8 million hectares (Government of British Columbia, 2025); the 2021 heat dome caused 619 deaths (Beugin et al., 2023); and an atmospheric river[1] that same year triggered widespread flooding and landslides, resulting in an estimated $450 million in damage (Gifford et al., 2022). Without effective climate change mitigation and adaptation, the risks to lives, homes, communities, and BC's long-term prosperity are expected to grow.

Moreover, when hazards turn into disasters, their impacts are not felt equally. One group that is disproportionately affected and often overlooked in government disaster and emergency management is newcomers (Canadian Red Cross, 2007; Watterodt et al., 2025; Wright et al., 2022). The term, newcomer, is widely used in literature, popular media, and government policy to describe individuals who have been in Canada for a relatively short time, usually five years or less (Caidi & Allard, 2005; Statistics Canada, 2008; Wright et al., 2022). These individuals include international students, refugee claimants, temporary foreign workers, recent permanent residents, and long-term visitors such as parents or grandparents on a super visa (which allows extended stays of up to five years at a time). This group also includes spouses or dependents of temporary visa holders; for example, a student's spouse who is granted an open work permit.

This article is grounded in the author's reflective insights.[2] These are shaped by personal experience as a newcomer who has lived through disasters, informal and semi-formal conversations with other newcomers through voluntary community organizing in Metro Vancouver and Vancouver Island, and professional experience in disaster risk management policy within the province. These perspectives reveal a persistent gap: disaster awareness and preparedness are often absent from newcomer settlement conversations. This absence poses a real threat to overall community resilience, which relies on the preparedness of all residents, regardless of background or immigration status (Acharibasam & Datta, 2024; Cutter, 2020). Disaster preparedness in BC often assumes that people already know what to do. While this may hold true for long-term residents, it unintentionally excludes newcomers. This is because their realities include limited informal support networks or social capital, unfamiliarity with local risks, and structural barriers—all of which can make disaster preparedness a low priority. With all these in mind, this article contributes to the growing literature on immigrants and equity-informed disaster risk management (Dadson et al., 2025; Wright et al., 2022; Yong et al., 2017). Specifically, it explores how newcomers navigate hazards in BC and how current disaster preparedness strategies systematically overlook them.

Recent hazard events, including earthquakes, wildfires, and extreme heat, have sparked discussions among newcomer communities. For example, a temporary resident expressed growing anxiety following a series of minor-to-light earthquakes in early 2025 (see Duerksen, 2025). He asked on a newcomer WhatsApp support group, 'What do you all think of the earthquakes? Should I pack my bags and leave Victoria? Because multiple small earthquakes within a short period of time just seem like something huge is coming.' This moment therefore offers a timely opportunity to rethink disaster preparedness and engagement strategies – ones informed by how newcomers contemplate, discuss, experience, navigate, and engage with hazards and disasters.

These dynamics mirror international debates in energy transitions and environmental governance, where policy strategies often overlook lived experiences, especially of those likely to face intersectional disadvantage, despite the clear benefits of inclusion (Hihetah et al., 2024; Koch et al., 2021).

The newcomer experience: New to BC, new to risks but other priorities

Disaster preparedness is often a non-existent or lower priority for newcomers in the immediate and mid-term. This may be particularly common when adjusting to a new system feels far more urgent – or when they do not even know they need to prepare, for various reasons. In informal settings for instance, it is not uncommon to encounter a lack of awareness about the region's seismic vulnerability: a newcomer who had lived in Metro Vancouver and Victoria for four years reported to be shocked when he finally learnt about the region's nearness to the Cascadia Subduction Zone, from other peers, and the high risk of earthquakes and tsunamis.

From the moment they arrive in BC, newcomers must quickly adapt to unfamiliar systems. For those with families or dependents, the pressure to stabilise is even greater. They need to secure housing in an increasingly unaffordable market, navigate a new financial landscape, and find employment or economic opportunities. They also need to pursue academic or professional goals like practising certifications, understand a new healthcare system, start or transition businesses, prepare for their asylum hearings, care for themselves and their families, and begin the slow and complex process of cultural integration. Amid all this, disaster preparedness is often seen as a 'later' problem—but by then, it may be too late. In many cases, newcomers may not have experienced disasters before, or at least not the kinds that are prevalent and now emerging in BC. Hazard profiles in their regions of origin may differ drastically. Even when disasters are familiar, the scale and characteristics may not be. For example, in parts of West Africa, flood events might submerge entire homes and farmlands, leading to mass displacement. In contrast, floods in BC often take the form of basement flooding or backflow due to heavy rainfall and urban drainage issues. These differing lived experiences influence whether newcomers know to prepare for hazards at all (Acharibasam & Datta, 2024; Lemyre et al., 2009), and where such preparation falls on their personal or family list of priorities.

Language and culture further shape how hazards are understood. Newcomers may have different cultural interpretations or linguistic descriptions of natural hazards. For example, the concept of an 'atmospheric river' may not translate meaningfully, as rivers are typically understood as land-based bodies of water, making the idea of one in the atmosphere seem implausible. In one instance, a recent immigrant reacted to a January 2024 extreme weather forecast for southwestern British Columbia (Emergency Management and Climate Readiness, 2024) with naïve confidence, 'What do you mean? How can you say we have an incoming river in the atmosphere?' Similarly, the word for 'drought' in some languages, like *Ọ̀gbẹlẹ̀* in Yoruba, evokes visible famine conditions with cracked and hardened soil, while in BC, drought is currently defined through hydrological indicators such as reduced lake storage, streamflow discharge, and groundwater levels, which may be less apparent. Following a community beach volleyball game organised by a group of newcomers in Summer of 2024, they were informed of heightened provincial drought advisories (Skrypnek & Depner, 2024) and requested to limit water use while washing up. They remarked, 'Do you know what drought is? Everything will be dry and there will be no water flowing. The drought will be visible.' These responses highlight the gap between the technical meteorological language and definitions used by local authorities and the tangible, often more dramatic, everyday experiences that many

newcomers expect based on their previous environments, cultural understanding, and native languages. These considerations have been raised, in part, in a disaster preparedness manual developed for first responders and planners serving newcomer communities in the United States (Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, 2013). Such disconnects reinforce the need for effective risk communication that accounts for and is tailored to differing perceptions (Yong et al., 2017). It also aligns closely with Bankoff's concept of 'cultures of disaster', which argues that risk perceptions and preparedness strategies are profoundly shaped by historically rooted cultural understandings and lived experiences of hazards (Bankoff, 2003). Therefore, effective disaster risk management must acknowledge and meaningfully integrate these culturally specific perspectives, rather than assuming a universal interpretation of hazards.

Additionally, newcomers are increasingly featured in the news and often blamed in media and public discourse for issues such as housing unaffordability, the shortage of family doctors, hospital wait times, job scarcity, and crime (Drydyk, 2024; Linthicum, 2024; The Refugee Centre, 2025). These concerns, coupled with negative framing, often dominate both political narratives and media coverage (Linthicum, 2024; The Refugee Centre, 2025), pushing disaster preparedness for newcomers lower on the agenda. This negative representation of newcomers has been particularly noticeable amid the United States' trade war on Canada under the Trump administration (Finlayson, 2025), alongside the undermining of interconnections between multilateralism and cross-border labour mobility, as well as the global economic downturn affecting the province (Office of the Premier, Government of British Columbia, 2025). As a result, newcomers may feel unwelcome, guilty, or ashamed, like uninvited guests. Research shows that negative media framing in immigrant destination countries such as Canada, United States, and Norway can significantly impact newcomers' sense of belonging, dehumanizes them, and excludes them from proactive engagement in their new communities (Esses et al., 2013). Seeking information on hazards and disaster preparedness can further reinforce the perception of newcomers that they are a burden on their communities.

Finally, many newcomers arrive in BC with temporary immigration status as international students, asylum claimants whose applications are under review, or temporary foreign workers. For these individuals, most essential aspects of daily life, through the years, are tied to the expiration date on their passports and visas. Critical documents like Social Insurance Numbers, health cards, and driver's licenses are suspended or become invalid when passports expire, requiring constant renewal and administrative navigation. Temporary status also limits access to vital services. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many temporary residents were only eligible for limited government financial relief programs. Others face barriers to government-administered subsidised housing programs, student financial aid, access to credit and certain banking services, and long-term or permanent employment opportunities. In this context, life can feel precarious and conditional – centred around maintaining legal status rather than establishing long-term roots. Seeking hazard information or investing in preparedness strategies may not feel worthwhile when everything else – from housing to healthcare to employment – signals that you are not yet a full or permanent member of the community. For many, it becomes hard to justify preparing for a future that still feels uncertain. Similar experiences have been noted in the United States, where immigrants without legal permanent resident status often hesitate to access government resources due to a 'climate of fear' fuelled by sudden and unpredictable shifts in immigration policies (Fussell et al., 2018). As a result, they are generally less prepared for disasters, face greater risks before and during hazards, and experience slower, less comprehensive recovery compared to immigrants with permanent status or naturalized citizens (Fussell et al., 2018). Such precarious conditions facing temporary residents in BC or elsewhere mirror the structural vulnerabilities outlined by Wisner et al. (2004) in

the Pressure and Release (PAR) model. Wisner's framework highlights how underlying socio-economic and policy factors – such as temporary legal statuses and limited access to essential services – amplify vulnerability. These conditions also complicate disaster preparedness for disproportionately impacted groups like newcomers, especially those with temporary status.

Policy gaps in engaging newcomers on disasters

One of the key structural gaps in how newcomers are engaged in disaster preparedness lies in how information is designed and delivered. Disaster information in BC is not tailored to the unique needs and realities of newcomers. In some cases, this results from deliberate prioritization: governments often focus on infrastructure, business continuity, and broader public safety over specialised outreach. In other cases, it is likely a matter of omission due to limited capacity, specialised outreach not outlined in mandate letters, or competing government priorities.

The dominant government approach to disaster preparedness assumes a baseline of knowledge: that people already know what to do in the event of an emergency. This may be a fair assumption for long-term residents, local communities, established businesses, and industries. These groups typically have the informal support networks, greater social capital, institutional knowledge, and lived experiences that help them prepare for and respond to disasters. For example, an adult local resident may have received local hazard education while in elementary school or participated in multiple public safety drills and scenario planning exercises through the years. Public awareness campaigns are often built on the assumption of familiarity with the hazards - an assumption that breaks down for newcomers, who may recognize and understand heat waves or flooding but do not recognize other local threats such as wildfire smoke, heat domes, atmospheric rivers, lahars, or seismic hazards (shaking, liquefaction, and landslides).

Another key gap is in newcomer orientation and settlement information materials. Disaster preparedness is often missing from welcome packages and orientation programs provided by settlement agencies, government services, or educational institutions. A review of key settlement resources in BC confirms this gap. The British Columbia Newcomers' Guide (Government of British Columbia, 2021), the Federal Settlement Information Webpage (Government of Canada, 2025), and the NewToBC online Newcomer Guides (NewToBC, n.d.) do not highlight disaster preparedness. Orientation resources from universities and colleges that attract the most international students and researchers in BC, such as the University of British Columbia and Langara College, also do not. Among the sources reviewed, only the Immigrant Services Society of BC includes an emergency preparedness handout as part of its settlement programming – an encouraging exception, offered through a climate readiness initiative funded by Vancouver Coastal Health (ISSofBC, 2025). These omissions, though perhaps unintentional, may send an implicit message that disaster risk is not an immediate concern, even though many newcomers are settling in high-risk urban, peri-urban, and rural areas.

Representation also matters. Newcomers and their perspectives are often absent from the decision-making structures that shape disaster risk awareness and preparedness strategies. These include government departments and agencies, advisory boards, and planning committees. When newcomers are not meaningfully represented and empowered in these spaces, how can their unique experiences, needs, and ways of engaging with risk truly be understood or reflected? Even where engagement occurs externally through consultation or stakeholder processes, without formal roles or

internal inclusion, there is often little follow-through to integrate their input into institutional decisions. This absence raises important questions about whose realities are being prioritised in disaster planning and preparedness, more broadly – and whose are being overlooked. Effective disaster risk management practices highlight the importance of diverse stakeholder representation, emphasizing that exclusion leads to policies disconnected from the realities of disproportionately impacted groups, including newcomers (Gaillard & Mercer, 2013).

The current policy environment often places newcomers in a position reminiscent of Beckett's protagonists in *Waiting for Godot*, perpetually anticipating institutional action. In this narrative, 'Godot' becomes a symbol for this institutional support that is frequently absent: targeted preparedness resources and cultural-sensitive communication that address newcomers' unique experiences and needs (Acharibasam & Datta, 2024). Rather than remain in passive anticipation, newcomers can – and often do – assert agency by leveraging informal community networks, digital communication platforms, and peer support structures to fill critical informational gaps in disaster preparedness. This peer-to-peer reliance emerges not only from the absence of long-term social or professional networks but also from the trust that comes with shared migratory journeys and cultural relatability. While many newcomers possess prior disaster experience abroad, evidence from other national contexts, such as England, indicates that such experience does not necessarily translate into preparedness in their new communities. Differences in disaster characteristics, government capabilities, and sociocultural expectations can limit the applicability of prior knowledge and reduce perceived urgency to prepare (Riyait, 2016; Robertson, 2004). Nonetheless, many newcomers bring and draw on transferable strengths, such as adaptability, multilingual proficiency, professional expertise, or experience navigating hazards and complex situations, that they creatively apply to their new environments. Digital platforms like WhatsApp groups serve as vital hubs where 'experienced' newcomers share advice, resources, and localised knowledge, often forming the basis for digital neighbourhoods that often extend into offline mutual aid and support. Recognizing and strengthening this existing agency shifts the paradigm of disaster preparedness from passive dependence on absent, delayed, or limited institutional interventions toward proactive, community-driven empowerment.

Conclusion and recommendations

Disaster preparedness strategies in British Columbia, particularly across Greater Victoria and Metro Vancouver, often overlook the specific realities of newcomers. Public messaging and emergency plans tend to assume a baseline familiarity with local hazards, systems, and services. This is an assumption that does not always hold for people who have recently arrived from different risk environments around the world. While not disengaged, newcomers are navigating complex transitions that often push hazard awareness down their list of immediate priorities. However, this does not mean they are uninterested. In fact, recent hazard events show that there are clear, timely opportunities to improve engagement if governments and institutions are willing to adapt their approaches and work together with community organizations for better outcomes.

First, there is a need to shift from a 'long-term safety' narrative to a 'right-now survival' approach, since preparedness can mean the difference between life and death (Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, 2013). This could involve preparedness messaging that aligns with the immediate concerns of newcomers, such as safe housing, family health, and personal security. By linking hazard awareness to urgent needs, rather than treating it as a distant or abstract risk, public agencies can make disaster

preparedness more relevant and accessible to newcomers adjusting to life in a new environment.

Second, governments and emergency management organizations should ramp up tailored outreach during and shortly after hazard events – not as a starting point, but as a critical window for deepening engagement and trust. These moments often ignite high levels of engagement within newcomer networks, particularly across digital platforms (Wright et al., 2022) and community spaces. This organic response shows that newcomers are paying attention, just not in the way traditional disaster authorities might expect. These moments offer valuable windows for targeted and tailored communication and meaningful public engagement (Yong et al., 2017).

Third, governments and companies engaged in corporate social responsibility should fund and partner with community-based networks that are already deeply involved in supporting newcomers. These groups help with everything from housing to mental health and have built trust in ways formal systems often have not. Providing financial and logistical support towards joint initiatives or to these community organizations to also deliver emergency preparedness and hazard awareness programming can significantly strengthen disaster resilience in newcomer communities by leveraging existing trust, programming, and communication networks (Rivera & Nickels, 2014). This approach is not entirely new, at least in the United States, where Fussell et al. (2018) has also highlighted the importance of partnerships between public health and disaster initiatives and organizations already serving immigrants directly. One successful example is the network of labour organizations, worker centres, and university-based programs funded by the federal government to enhance preparedness among immigrant workers and residents in disaster zones across California, New York, Texas, Florida, and New Jersey for example.

Finally, disaster preparedness communication must meet people where they are. This means distributing information through familiar, preferred, and accessible social media channels (Wright et al., 2022) such as WhatsApp, Telegram, WeChat, and community events or centres. Many newcomers rely on these spaces for real-time updates and peer support. Tools such as AI-powered multilingual chatbots, voice messages, and translated visual materials can help bridge digital and language divides, ensuring critical information reaches its intended audience effectively.

Together, these steps can help build a disaster preparedness strategy that is both more inclusive and more effective: meeting newcomers in the present moment and empowering them to prepare for the future. Strengthening preparedness among newcomers also reinforce the resilience of British Columbia entirely, recognizing that inclusive preparedness benefits everyone. While this article is grounded in the context of British Columbia, the patterns explored such as assumed familiarity with local systems, policy blind spots, and informal community adaptation are not unique to it. Similar challenges appear in other jurisdictions navigating natural and climate-related risks. For example, in Australia, the United Kingdom, United States, and Japan, migrant communities are often overlooked due to assumptions that do not hold for everyone, they face barriers to disaster information, experience limited inclusion in preparedness planning, and often rely on limited informal networks to navigate hazards (Aikawa & Akiyoshi, 2024; Chandonnet, 2021; Fussell et al., 2018; Hayes & Ryan, 2024; Robertson, 2004). The insights offered here may therefore inform broader efforts to align disaster preparedness and climate change adaptation with the lived realities of diverse, mobile, and migrant population groups.

Notes

[1] An atmospheric river is a type of extreme weather event that affects parts of North America, Europe, South America, Southeast Asia, and New Zealand. It is a long, concentrated region of water vapor in the atmosphere, essentially 'river in the sky', that can transport significant amounts of moisture from the tropics. It is beneficial for water supply but can lead to dangerous flooding and landslide due to intense rainfall and snowfall it produces sometimes.

[2] The reflections and analysis presented represent the author's independent perspective rather than views of institutional/professional affiliations.

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