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DISASTER RECOVERY AND RESILIENCE IN ALIMAPU, “THE BURNT LAND”

Allison Stewart

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The history of Chile has been fraught by natural and socionatural disasters. Nevertheless, there is limited research on mental and emotional health effects and the coping mechanisms people use to persevere. This qualitative, descriptive study explores the stories of those affected by the Great Fire of Valparaíso, Chile, in 2014 and the opinions of the professionals involved in the recovery process to reveal how resilience is manifested among the disaster survivors. The sample population was composed of seven disaster survivors from the communities of Cerro Ramaditas and Cerro Mariposa, as well as four professionals that participated in research and reconstruction following the fire. Through semi-structured interviews and participant and non-participant observation, the study sought to contextualize resilience in Valparaíso, originally known as Alimapu or “the burnt land.” As with other traumatic events, the fire left emotional damage on each individual affected. However, the interviews illuminated the attributes of positive mental health that have allowed the victims to move on and rebuild their lives. The powerful words of the respondents maintained that there exists a particular strength of Chileans to unite and overcome disaster, a motivation that comes more from within the communities themselves than from the external assistance they receive. Factors of resilience vary on an individual level, but various key components of community resilience emerged from the data: shared history of natural disasters, solidarity, attachment to place, and projection of a future life. Community resilience was additionally found to be tied to the struggle to gain representation for a vulnerable population and the long history of resistance among the indigenous peoples in south-central Chile. By revealing the flaws in official disaster response and highlighting the mechanisms used to persevere, this research has implications for the improvement of interventions that can reinforce resilience in the case of disaster or trauma.