



### Impacts to social cohesion

Community cohesion can be described as the "glue" that holds a community together. It relates to the togetherness and bonding exhibited by members of a community. Communities with high cohesion often have a clear community identity and strong attachment to place. The emergence of social division within a community can lead to tension or hostility [1]. In the case of a technological disaster, impacts may manifest as immediate changes or they may be delayed in time. Lagging litigation for relief and compensation extends the time period for rehabilitation and recovery of victims, dragging out social cohesion impacts [2]. Social disruptions can become permanent and cause chronic community stress, sometimes labeled as "the corrosive community" [3].

#### Impacts to social cohesion

- Conflict and tension within families, neighborhoods, groups
- Change in relationships
- Decline in social capital (groups, community activities, etc.)
- Changes in one's "sense of place" which includes attachment to the community
- Lower community resilience to coping and planning for other problems
- Out migration

#### Community cohesion: *M/V Exxon Valdez*



**Native Alaskan mother & daughter**

Photo: Nick Hall in (7)

On March 24, 1989, the supertanker *Exxon Valdez* spilled 10.8 million gallons of crude oil in Prince William Sound, Alaska, a valuable commercial fishing ground. The region affected by the spill comprises many small communities composed of Native and non-Native Alaskans highly dependent on commercial and subsistence fishing. With fishing income interrupted, people turned to the cleanup activities to earn cash. Social impact studies made in the two years following the spill found several notable impacts. In non-Native communities, there were tensions among those who worked on the spill and those who didn't.

"Exxon whores" and "Spillionaires" were derogatory names for people who made a profit from the disaster. One person remarked to a researcher: "*Friends have become enemies. There is name calling among those associated with Exxon. People avoid stores, stay home and hide, feel burdens, and there are more strangers*" [5, p.79]. People who worked on the cleanup were paid very disproportionately by Exxon. The sudden changes in wealth among community members created awkward relationships among partners, neighbors, and friends [5].



## Human Dimensions Impacts of Oil Spills

Residents who were involved in cleanup activities reported a decline in relations with family members, relatives, co-workers, friends and neighbors who were not involved in the cleanup [3-7]. Friction was reported among friends over environmental destruction of the spill and Exxon's fault and responsibility, in addition to issues of jobs and income as described above. In one Native Alaskan village a person noted how prestige associated with the cleanup led to arrogance, which was a problem for the community:

*"Just because of a job title attached to your name gave you the reason to be somebody who turned on the rest of your community people ...you earn the same amount of money as everybody else but ... it just made you tend to be a lot more arrogant, which is so unnatural for [the community]."* [4, p.6].



**Commercial fishing boat**, Unknown photograph  
<http://www.escapeartist.com/efam/87/Alaska.html>

In some Native villages, more than 40% of the participants reported conflicts resulting in the dissolution of friendships [4]. The long working hours on the spill was another factor in interpersonal conflicts. They had less time and energy to participate in religious activities and community celebrations [3-7]. There was a decline in level of social interaction. In some Native Alaskan communities, so many adults left to work on the spill that childcare became a problem. Children were left to the care of the oldest child and when parents returned, there were conflicts over how best to parent children [4]. The long working hours also affected couple relationships: *"[The cleanup] contributed to my break-up with my fiancée. The spill caused lots of pressure for me to keep my business going. I was stressed and it affected my relationship."* [4, p. 6]

There was an increase in alcohol abuse and domestic violence resulting in separations. In some communities, residents felt positive changes resulting from the spill such as economic benefits and a strong sense of community in time of hardship [4]. However, these cases tend to be isolated. The fragmentation and overall decline of social integration corroded the social fabric on which communities rely in time of adversity [3-7].

### References

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