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Psychosocial response to risk mitigation measures in Iceland

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Land use planning has been espoused as a key measure to decrease the risk of climate change-related disasters including landslides, however there is a dearth of research on how it affects the psychosocial wellbeing of affected people. This ethnographic study examines the risk management of the Svínafellsheiði fracture in south-east Iceland, where 60 to 100 million cubic metres of debris is predicted to fall onto the glacier below, and cause flooding from or a tsunami in the proglacial lake. A no-build zone was put in place between 2018 and 2020 to prevent a further increase in the number of people exposed to the hazard. Our results indicate that the no-build zone had both direct and indirect adverse effects on the psychosocial wellbeing of those affected. It caused frustration about a perceived inability to make changes to home and businesses, people feeling that their future was in limbo or on hold, and people questioning their future in the area. These direct psychosocial effects also had the knock-on effect of causing people to talk more about the risk, thereby undermining a key coping mechanism.