WHAT WAS FOUND?

There was progressive recovery from the disaster and the subsequent disruptions at community level over time but there was also evidence of extended impacts on individual mental health.

At 5 years post bushfires, 22% of people in high impact communities were reporting symptoms of mental health disorders at approximately twice the rate evident in low impact communities and what would be expected in the general population.

Close friends and family, social networks and community groups were important influences on resilience and recovery.

Social ties matter. More close people generally relates to better mental health and personal wellbeing.

Risk of depression was higher for those connected to other depressed people.

Risk of PTSD was associated with more fractured social networks.

Involvement in local community groups and organisations was associated with more positive outcomes in terms of mental health and wellbeing.

The Beyond Bushfires: Community Resilience and Recovery research findings were designed to guide disaster resilience policy and services. The social and community factors impacting mental health and resilience in the 3-5 years after the Black Saturday bushfires of February 2009 were examined. The original 6 year study involving over 1,000 participants across Victoria was conducted by The University of Melbourne in partnership with community members and a range of community, academic, government, emergency, and health agencies.
WHAT WAS FOUND? CONT.

The major stressors that occurred after the fires, including loss of income, loss of accommodation and relationship breakdown, increased risk of poor mental health outcomes.

People living alone were at higher risk of poor mental health outcomes but this risk was reduced for people who belonged to local community groups.

In communities in which many people belonged to local groups, the benefits extended to other people living in that community. This shows that community group membership is a key factor in establishing and maintaining healthy and resilient communities.

Strong attachment to the natural environment was also associated with increased mental health, life satisfaction, resilience, community attachment & posttraumatic growth.

People who relocated out of affected communities had similar levels of wellbeing 3-5 years afterwards compared to those that stayed, but showed different support service needs.

Further analyses using NAPLAN data showed delayed impacts on children's reading and maths scores 2-4 years after the fires.

The Beyond Bushfires Final report was produced to provide a simple overview of key findings. The detailed Beyond Bushfires academic papers published to date can be found here - www.beyondbushfires.org.au

IMPLICATIONS

The detailed findings from the Beyond Bushfires study are an important resource for planning for recovery from the 2019/2020 fires.

Recovery plans for major disasters require a 5 year framework to account for extended mental health impacts.

Monitoring the spread of membership in community groups is a useful indicator of a healthy and resilient community.

Investing in community groups may help to promote individual and community resilience.

Restoration of the natural environment should be included in recovery planning.

National resilience planning needs to include the education system.

NAPLAN should be continued as an important longitudinal research tool.

We are now analysing results collected 10 years after the Black Saturday bushfires to increase our understanding of long term disaster recovery.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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INDIVIDUAL
Consider mental health planning
Be kind to yourself & others
Be open to the possibility of positives
We are all different

FAMILY
Plan ahead for how to find each other
Remember the children
Adaptive parenting

COMMUNITY
Community groups can make a difference
Relocating can help for some
Changes in the natural environment can influence recovery
Go online

SYSTEMS/ SERVICES
Something for parents
Government mental health and wellbeing planning
Communication register
Online information
Screening for risk

PUBLIC POLICY
Five year recovery plan
Involvement of local government and community
Local emergency management plans
Invest in community groups

Government disaster planning for schools
Parks and recreation facilities
Recognise community leaders

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