



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

Photo credit: Ngaire Walhout

THE BEYOND BUSHFIRES STUDY

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?

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.

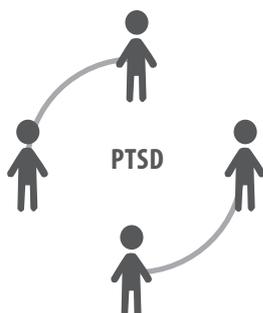
Close friends and family, social networks and community groups were important influences on resilience and recovery.



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

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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R E C O M M E N D A T I O N S

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