



Recovery work in cascading and compounding disasters: A qualitative study of community recovery workers in Australia

The Problem

In emergency management, disasters are often looked at as **single 'events' that are managed separately**. This means that disaster recovery is usually funded for one disaster at a time. However, **disasters increasingly overlap, repeat or occur in quick succession**, causing the phenomenon of multiple or compounding disasters.

For example, many Australian communities experienced the **2019-20 bushfires** and then experienced **repeated floods in 2022**. It was unclear how recovery work was happening in communities that experienced more than one disaster.

What did we do?

This study aimed to understand the experience of the Australian **disaster recovery workforce** in communities that experienced multiple disasters. We asked:

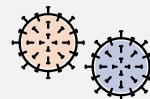
How do recovery workers see multiple disasters **impacting community recovery**?

How is the process of **supporting disaster recovery affected** by another disaster (or disasters) occurring?

We examined many types of disasters that could occur together. Participants were located in communities that experienced **bushfires, floods, droughts, heat waves, cyclones**, and more.

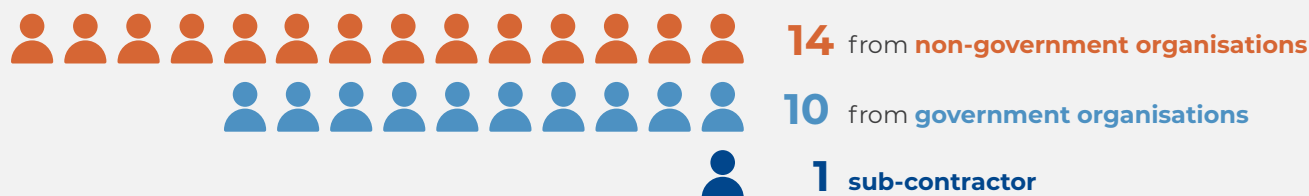
How did we do it?

Interviews with **25 recovery workers** — across **Australia** — communities that experienced **2 or more disasters** — between **2017** and **2022** — in addition to the **COVID-19** pandemic



Recovery workers from **all states of Australia** took part in the study. There were no participants from the NT or ACT.

There was a mix of **recovery workers**



We carried out a **thematic analysis** of transcribed interviews to address the research questions.

For further information

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Key Findings

Recovery workers reported that multiple disasters were **amplifying the financial, housing, physical and mental health impacts** in the communities where they worked. For example, recovery workers witnessed financial problems and housing problems that becoming worse with each disaster, unresolved trauma resurfacing, and in some cases the effects of multiple disasters blurring together and becoming difficult to separate. However, recovery workers were often constrained by their roles being funded and structured in relation to one specified disaster (or one disaster stage).

The definition of recovery roles around one disaster led to difficult job experiences.

- Some recovery workers were **shifted to work on response to a new disaster and told to stop supporting recovery**, while others were told to **continue both existing recovery work and start response work** to a new disaster.
- Many recovery workers felt that the current model of event-specific disaster funding, which typically funded their roles, was different to the 'real life' or 'real communities' they were in.
- Further, many recovery workers said they had **not experienced any training about what to do when encountering the impacts of multiple disasters** at the same time.

These findings highlight the complexity of recovery work in settings of multiple disasters and identify the need to **shift disaster support programs beyond looking at disasters as single events**. The recommendations from this study, below, outline how we can begin to consider recovery from multiple disasters at the same time.

Key Recommendations

For organisations active in disaster recovery:

- Hire community-based recovery workers based on **responding to outstanding need**, rather than tying them to one specific disaster or disaster 'stage'
- Develop **training** for recovery workers on the effects of **multiple disasters**; avoid situations where workforces have only been trained for single disasters or one hazard at a time

For government:

- Ensure that disaster recovery funds, support programs and workforces are structured in a way that directly recognise that multiple disasters can occur. **Stop tying disaster recovery payments to single events**; instead, shift to longer-term disaster recovery funding that is available across multiple events.
- Recognise that people may be recovering from **multiple disasters at the same time** and may need assistance with their combined effects

For researchers:

There is a need for further studies to:

- Examine the effects of both declared **disasters and non-declared disasters**, which may compound and interact with existing social inequalities over time
- Test the **efficacy of social recovery programs** and interventions for the public in multi-disaster settings
- Pilot **recovery worker training modules** on supporting communities through multiple disasters
- Explore whether there are any differences in **recovery experiences based on the timelines** on which the disasters occurred



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