



Symposium

In October the first Beyond Bushfires symposium was held at The University of Melbourne. We had 120 people attend the day, enabling in-depth discussions between the research team, community members, study partners, service providers and government representatives. The interactive sessions provided great insight into interpreting the findings, service implications, future directions and issues of interest to local bushfire affected communities.

We have been thinking about responses to the questions and comments from the day and have attached a summary of these. Additionally, many people have been in contact requesting a summary of the day's presentations – the links and passwords are attached (NB: the audience feedback and discussion weren't video recorded on the day).

Please do not make these passwords publicly available as it may affect our ability to publish in academic journals which may mean our findings don't reach a broader audience such as decision makers.

General study update:

We currently have four published academic journal articles:

- Gibbs L, Waters E, Bryant R, Pattison P, Lusher D, Harms L, Richardson J, MacDougall C, Block K, Snowdon E, Gallagher H C, Sinnott V, Ireton G, Forbes D. (2013) Beyond Bushfires: Community, Resilience and Recovery – A longitudinal mixed method study of the medium to long term impacts of bushfires on mental health and social connectedness. BMC Public Health. 13:1036. goo.gl/bJdsFI – follow this link for free copy of full article
- Bryant R, Waters E, Gibbs L, Gallagher C, Pattison P, Lusher D, MacDougall C, Harms L, Block K, Snowdon E, Sinnott V, Ireton G, Richardson J, Forbes D (2014). Psychological Outcomes Following the Victorian Black Saturday Bushfires. Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry. 48 (7) 634-643. goo.gl/KHlwaL – follow this link for free copy of full article



- Gibbs L, Snowdon E, Block K, Gallagher HC, MacDougall C, Ireton G, Pirrone-Savona A, Forbes D, Richardson J, Harms L, Waters E. (2014) Where do we start? A proposed post disaster intervention framework for children and young people. *Pastoral Care and Education*. 32 (1): 68-87
goo.gl/a7lYbM – email us for a copy of full article
- Block, K, Gibbs, L, Snowdon, E, & MacDougall, C. (2014). Participant guided mobile methods: Investigating personal experiences of communities. *SAGE Research Methods Cases*. London: Sage Publications, Ltd.
goo.gl/MJMLQk – email us for a copy of the full article

The findings have been shared in 2014 through 11 presentations at national and international conferences (as well as the Beyond Bushfires Symposium). The symposium was discussed on ABC radio and through print media. We are currently working on many other analyses with the range of data collected to understand different life impacts post-bushfires. Papers expected to be published next year include:

1. Children and young people's wellbeing post-disaster: Safety and stability are critical. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*
2. Conceptualising post-disaster recovery: Incorporating experiences of grief and loss.
3. The Role of Anger and Ongoing Stressors in Mental Health Following Natural Disaster
4. The Effects of Separation From Close Family Members on Mental Health and Attachment Styles in a disaster.
5. Post-Bushfire Relocation and Personal Wellbeing: A Case Study from Victoria, Australia.

Currently, we have only reported on data from our first survey and are looking forward to exploring the impacts from surveys completed a few months ago. Next year will be filled with more findings to share with you and we will continue to increase our understanding of communities post-bushfire. It has been due to the continued involvement from our participants completing surveys and participating in interviews that has allowed local issues to be explored in such depth.

Another positive year

The Beyond Bushfires team would like to extend our deepest gratitude to those who have been part of our study and communications throughout this year. At this time we extend our very best wishes for a restful holiday season and that the New Year brings kindness and growth. We look forward to continuing to work with you to strengthen and develop this research project further, and to make sure the findings are used in meaningful ways.

Symposium – response to questions raised

After the introductory sessions at the Beyond Bushfires symposium, people were given an opportunity to write questions on pieces of paper to contribute to the discussions in the following sessions. Many of these questions were given to presenters to address in their presentations, and many were retained to be considered in-depth by the research team afterwards. It is difficult to summarise the questions because of the range covered, reflecting the audience appreciation of the complexity of the research topics. Many of the written comments were important issues for us to consider in our current analyses and in the development of the next phase of Beyond Bushfires.

There was a strong theme of interest in service provider issues, ranging from the benefits of using local versus external providers, the impact of funding on continuity of services, the contribution of some service providers to anger, and the impact of disaster response and recovery services on the service provider. We totally agree that these are all critical issues that have largely been outside of the scope of this study. We will ensure that they remain on the research agenda in our discussions with other researchers and service providers. We have been able to explore participant's positive and negative experiences with service providers. A paper reporting on the findings is planned for next year. We will also consider whether it is feasible to include some of these research questions in our own future research.

It was reported at the symposium that the various scales used to assess resilience are indicating the majority of people in the study are resilient and coping well (approximately 80%), but many are still reporting high levels of psychological distress and experiencing ongoing difficulties that require additional attention and support. Overall the rates of people reporting signs of any of the mental health disorders measured (PTSD, depression, severe mental distress) was 25.6% in the high-affected, 17.2% in the medium-affected and 11.7% in the low-affected communities. These rates are significantly higher than would be expected in the general population but audience members did not feel they reflected the true level of impact. There are a number of things to consider when looking at the mental health data. Firstly, these measures pertain to a finite time period over the previous month, and therefore may exclude people who have had (for example) depressive episodes in the past, but not at the time of the interview. Furthermore, these are probable indicators of clinical diagnoses; they are unlikely to reflect those who are experiencing situation-specific or low level distress and anxiety. Other individuals may be feeling stress from everyday events, but are in a better place to cope with stressors to the point that they avert more serious levels of mental distress.

There were queries about recovery timing in terms of how long it takes for trauma effects to emerge and what is considered short term, medium term and long term. This is what we are trying to determine by doing repeat surveys over time. The results should give us a good sense of how recovery and its impacts on health and wellbeing shift over time.

There was a lot of interest in the issues for children and young people. This is an area of particular concern for us. It is a difficult area to research because families and schools are necessarily protective of children but trust in our approach is building and we are learning more about the experiences and needs of children and young people and the services delivered in the recovery period – as reflected in the papers we are publishing. Next on our agenda is an analysis of Department of Education and Early Childhood Development data to explore bushfire impact on child health, wellbeing, development and academic outcomes.

There was an interest and concern expressed about domestic violence. While this was not specifically covered in the first survey (there was a question about experience of assault or violence), more specific questions were included in the second survey, although they were necessarily limited because of the range of issues covered in the survey. This will be explored in our analyses next year.

Anger came up in a number of questions raised by participants. We have explored this issue in detail and will continue to do so. David Forbes, Director of the Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health presented at the symposium our early findings in relation to the role of anger in addition to difficult major life events

after the disaster in influencing the mental health outcomes. Connie Kellett is also exploring the experiences of anger and the influence of service approach in her PhD studies. We will have more to tell you about these findings next year.

Queries were brought up regarding raised incidence of physical illness post disaster. We have included some physical health questions in the survey. This is our first priority in analyses next year.

Questions were also raised in relation to the impact of separation at the time of the fires. This was the subject of one of the presentations at the symposium and can be viewed by accessing the online videos of the day, as mentioned in the summary of the symposium. Two papers reporting on separation findings are planned for next year. We will keep you informed.

We also received a lot of queries and suggestions in relation to our research processes. If you are interested in detailed information about the methods, you can access the protocol paper for the study here <http://anp.sagepub.com/content/48/7/634>. Some specific details in response to questions: inclusion of a range of communities with different levels of disaster exposure is a strong study design to allow us to determine to what extent the bushfire exposure made a difference to how people are faring now. Resources prevent us from including all bushfire affected communities in the study but by including a diversity of experiences, the findings are likely to provide useful insights. Accessing addresses from the Victorian Electoral Commission helped us to reach people who were residents in communities at the time of the fires, even if they had since moved away. They only allowed us to send one letter to those addresses to comply with their privacy regulations but we used other methods to try to raise awareness of the study and opportunities for people to register. A small sample was included for qualitative interviews because quantitative (survey) findings are designed to provide a little bit of information from a lot of people to assess patterns and extent of impacts, whereas qualitative (interview) data is intended to provide a lot of information from a small number of people to provide insights into the lived experiences of community members and possible explanations for the survey findings. Community input during our visits to community meetings significantly influenced the questions asked and continues to contribute to decision making about how we analyse the data and interpret the findings.

If we have missed anything that is important to you or you have any additional queries or comments please feel free to email Elyse at: snowdone@unimelb.edu.au.

Best Regards,
The Beyond Bushfires Team

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