Social ties matter – experiencing and recovering from bushfires

Associate Professor Lisa Gibbs
University of Melbourne

Academic Research Team

Professor Elizabeth Waters,
Jack Brockhoff Child Health & Wellbeing Program,
University of Melbourne

Associate Professor Lisa Gibbs,
Jack Brockhoff Child Health & Wellbeing Program,
University of Melbourne

Professor Richard Bryant,
School of Psychology, University of NSW

Professor Philippa Pattison,
Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education),
University of Sydney

Professor David Forbes,
Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health,
University of Melbourne

Associate Professor Louise Harms,
Department of Social Work, University of Melbourne

Dr Dean Lusher,
Faculty of Business and Enterprise, Swinburne University of
Technology

Associate Professor Colin MacDougall,
Southgate Institute for Health, Equity and Society, Flinders
University

Dr Karen Block,
Jack Brockhoff Child Health & Wellbeing Program,
University of Melbourne

Dr Colin Gallagher,
Psychological Sciences, University of Melbourne

Ms Elyse Snowdon,
Jack Brockhoff Child Health & Wellbeing Program,
University of Melbourne

Ms Connie Kellett
PhD Student, University of Melbourne

BeyondBushfires
community | resilience | recovery

Establishing Partners

- A range of community organisations in each location

- Australian Red Cross

- Primary Care Partnerships from 6 regions

- Phoenix Australia: Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health

- Victorian Department of Health

- Australian Rotary Health

- Federal Department of Human Services (Centrelink)

- Universities: Melbourne, NSW, Flinders, Swinburne, Sydney

BeyondBushfires
community | resilience | recovery

Approaches

- Community visits and consultations
    - 2010-ongoing

- Telephone/online questionnaire with adults in 2012, 2014, 2016*
    - 1056 participants in 2012
    - 78% response rate in 2014

- In-depth interviews with children & adults (2013-2014)
    - 35 participants from high impact communities

BeyondBushfires
community | resilience | recovery

3-4 years after the bushfires, a significant minority were showing symptoms of mental health disorders (eg post-traumatic stress, anxiety, depression)

25.6% in high-impact communities, 17.2% in medium-impact and 11.7% in low-impact communities

BeyondBushfires
community | resilience | recovery

1/3 with marked distress had not received professional help in previous month

Within this group, women and men were equally likely to seek help

Severe psychological distress was predicted by fear for one's life in the bushfires and death of someone close to them in the bushfires

'Someone close' often referred to a community member.

Loss of friends and community members was predictive of poorer mental health outcomes.

I went to four funerals in that week and there were two I didn't get to go to because I was at others…And none of those first four were for one
person.

Beyond Bushfires
community | resilience | recovery

People with larger social networks were more likely to report loss of someone close

Experiencing major life stressors (e.g. change of income, change in accommodation) contributed to the mental health impacts of fire experiences
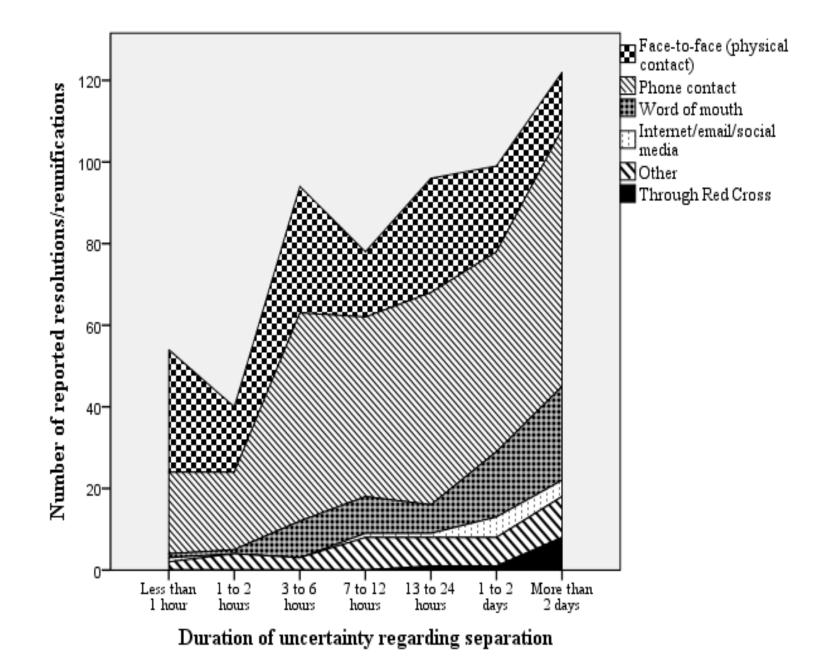
Experiencing intense anger also contributed to the mental health impacts of fire experiences

Of the 1016 survey participants, 56% reported that they had been separated from close family members during the fires. Of those, over 30% did not know the fate of their loved one for 24hrs or longer.

Legend:
- Face-to-face (physical contact)
- Phone contact
- Word of mouth
- Internet/email/social media
- Other
- Through Red Cross

Y-axis: Number of reported resolutions/reunifications

X-axis: Duration of uncertainty regarding separation

X-axis categories: Less than 1 hour, 1 to 2 hours, 3 to 6 hours, 7 to 12 hours, 13 to 24 hours, 1 to 2 days, More than 2 days

Separation from close loved ones, during and immediately after the fires, was a risk factor for mental health problems, particularly for people who tend to feel anxious about their relationships

Social ties matter - having more people you are close to is generally related to better mental health and personal wellbeing

BeyondBushfires
community | resilience | recovery

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

Living with someone else is associated with better outcomes

Participating in local groups is associated with better outcomes for those who live alone

- particularly evident for those who are retired and have secure relationships

BeyondBushfires
community | resilience | recovery

Family members responded differently to the experience of the bushfires and aftermath

People who were the most affected by the bushfires were more likely to move to a new community, with mixed experiences

I still talk about it as home

For those who stayed in their community there was generally a stronger sense of community connection

For those who moved to a different community, the impact of subsequent financial and relationship difficulties was often lessened
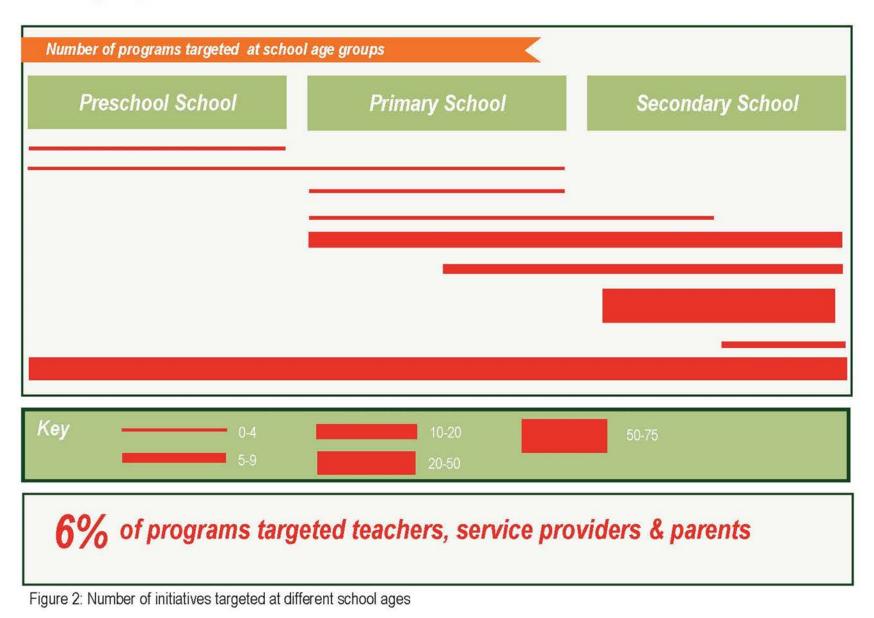
BeyondBushfires
community | resilience | recovery

In the aftermath of a disaster experience, children and young people seek safety and stability in their home, school, social, recreational and work environments

I remember changes all the time after the fires, things changing, doing things on different days and stuff like that.

BeyondBushfires
community | resilience | recovery

Infographic

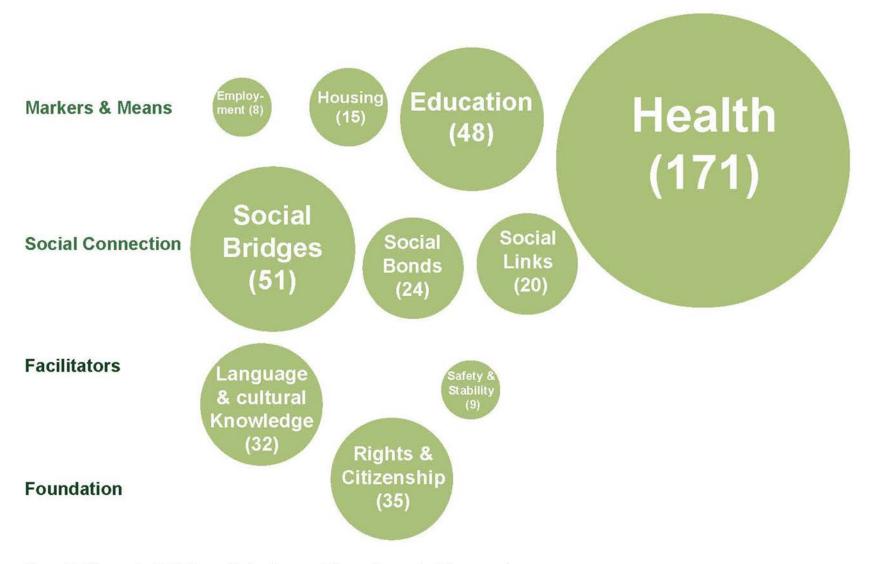Figure 2: Number of initiatives targeted at different school ages

Figure 7: Alignment of initiatives with the Ager and Strang Conceptual Framework

Next steps

Implications:

- Individual

- Service

- Policy

Further research

Lisa Gibbs
lgibbs@unimelb.edu.au