Men on Black Saturday

Risks and opportunities for change

Vol. 1 Executive Summary and Recommendations

Vol. 2 The Men's Accounts

Vol. 3 Men, Masculinity, Disaster: A literature review – online

The Black Hills

Like people of Pompeii
They stand and often lean
Upon each other, immobilised
By the momentary inferno.

I strain my ears to catch
A call of a bird or
The sounds of brushing leaves …
A memory of a canopy.

I strain my eyes to gather
The few fringes of green,
Newborn and perfectly formed,
Clinging to charry hosts.

I strain my heart to be
As optimistic as the trees,
Life will return to these black hills
This is no cemetery.

By Dianna Thomas

Acknowledgements

Cover painting: 'On a clear day' by Syd Tunn © *(03) 9712 039*

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Appendices and Vols 2, 3 and 4 – Available on the WHGNE website

This report is the result of original research into men's Black Saturday experience in Victoria, conducted under the auspices of Women's Health Goulburn North East (WHGNE) and Monash University's Injury Research Institute (MIRI), with funding from the National Disaster Resilience Grants Scheme (NDRGS).

Researching men's experience was new for WHGNE and for co-authors Claire Zara and Debra Parkinson. This diversion from our focus on women's health was the result of continual exclamations of 'What about the men?' when findings of increased family violence after Black Saturday were reported in our prior research, *The Way He Tells It: Relationships After Black Saturday.*[1] Motivated by the need to increase the safety of women and children after disasters and reduce men's harmful behaviours both to themselves and those around them, WHGNE and MIRI established this research project and an Advisory Group with specialist academic, professional and community expertise (see Acknowledgements). The research and its findings do not focus directly on family violence – instead they convey men's observations and feelings about their experiences. They spoke openly and generously to suggest ways to improve the management of disasters and their aftermath, thereby improving the health and wellbeing of all.

The report summarises the key findings of a qualitative study involving 32 adult men affected by the fires and/or their aftermath in Kinglake, Flowerdale, Marysville, Seymour, Alexandra and Yea and surrounding areas. Participants were recruited through community, health, and emergency services networks and public outreach, resulting in a self-selected sample of men aged 36-69, most living in stable relationships, and many (12) experienced fire-fighters or Country Fire Authority (CFA) or State Emergency Service (SES) volunteers. To explore the everyday realities the men faced during and after the fire, while allowing them to speak freely and in their own terms, a narrative analysis was pursued through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The interviews were lengthy – around two hours – which dispelled the common assertion that 'men don't talk'. The men's own comments – stating that 'the right questions need to be asked' or that 'No-one had asked them about their experiences or reflections – may explain the

You'd drive past these cars and you could see what was in them ... My first thought was, 'Why would you put logs inside of the car.' It was people inside of them.

~

He lost the plot... he just totally lost it when having to drive through the fire front. He was 'screaming and yelling and crying'.

~

I remember all these comments: 'Where the hell have you been? We've been waiting'. We couldn't say anything. We had no idea what we'd been through. We were just absolutely shattered.

~

By the time she got home ... it was almost pitch dark, choking smoke everywhere. She had no time to pack anything, I'd been telling her all bloody day to pack, 'Nah, nah, nah, it's safe, it's miles away'. I was like, 'Just pack'. She wouldn't bloody listen.

~

The expectation is that men will be tough and stoic and get on with it ... and women are just going to be some kind of support role and bake the cookies and make the tea.

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[1] http://www.whealth.com.au/documents/publications/whp-TheWayHeTellsIt.pdf

> *I took the first week off to deal with the immediate issues so then I needed to go back to work. No ifs or buts, I needed to support the family, I needed to take control of the business again.*
>
> ~
>
> *I went to go back to work a week after and I've never felt symptoms of anxiety but ... I got halfway down the highway and was sweating and almost physically vomiting.*
>
> ~
>
> *It was 'power over' rather than 'power with' ... It's profoundly disempowering.*
>
> ~
>
> *I didn't want to talk about it but they did. And they wouldn't let it go ... You can't answer those questions. You get angry and you don't want to get angry at the person, so I just turned my hear and walked away.*
>
> ~
>
> *The fact is that the way these contractors [Grocon] operate is hugely demoralising. And given that most of the blokes around here are tradies, that was a huge issue for them.*
>
> ~
>
> *He had this big rash here the same as me ... As soon as I saw it I said, 'Stress?' ' [He said] 'What are you talking about, stress? Bullshit, I don't suffer stress'.*
>
> ~
>
> *Why haven't you got it together? Why haven't you got your garden fixed? Why haven't you got your house done yet? What are you doing with your life? Why haven't you gone back to work? Why haven't you? (Bernard)*

misconception. Standard ethical research protocols were followed providing participants opportunities to amend their interview following verbatim transcription.

In the first of three sections analysing the findings, **Black Saturday: *'A filthy, extreme day'*** captures men's first-person accounts of how they prepared for and responded to the firestorm. For some men, the team environment, and command and control regime offered a measure of security but this soon dissipated. The fire- fighters' physically and emotionally exhausting work was regularly punctuated by worry for others, especially for their own families and homes.

The men spoke of doing what they could to survive on their own or with family, friends and neighbours, pushing through exhaustion in their attempts to save homes, animals and property using the resources at hand. While the impact of disaster varies according to gender, the men's narratives, and those of the 29 women in our previous research,[2] revealed that in life and death situations, men and women alike were agents in their own survival and the survival of others. Both spoke of courage, persistence, and selflessness, along with uncertainty, regret and terror.

For some men, the day was marked by frustrations with directives from authorities on roadblocks and in command centres. Pre-Black Saturday procedures seemed unsuited to the extreme conditions. In life and death situations, following rules and suppressing individual judgements at times meant the men could not save others, or even attempt to do so. Many did not have formal fire-fighting roles on Black Saturday yet were informally conscripted to help, or offered their help as the enormity of the fire became apparent. The men helped younger men, neighbours, friends, and colleagues, often at considerable personal risk. Some delayed their own urgent plans for survival in order to share information, advice, and protective clothing with others. Completely exhausted, both physically and emotionally, after helping friends and neighbours try to save their homes or escape danger (and often failing in this), they described feelings of frustration and powerlessness. These men paid a high price on Black Saturday and in its aftermath – a toll that would grow with the passage of time.

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[2] See both *The Way He Tells It* (2012), and *Beating the Flames* (2011) www.whealth.com.au/environmentaljustice

After Black Saturday: 'A hell of a lot of anger' picks up the story as the men struggled with new challenges related to community divisions, reconstruction patterns, economic loss and workplace issues. Physical and emotional violence in their community or personal relationships was a strong theme. The locals found that their initiative and drive in the early days was smothered by a recovery process described as overlooking local knowledge and expertise in community leadership. It further disadvantaged those locals with construction equipment and skills, and men and women needing help with disaster-affected businesses. The overall effect was disempowering, and contradicted the appearance of meaningful community consultation. Their sense of being patronised added to the stress caused by financial burdens related to the cost of rebuilding. They spoke of locals excluded from much-needed reconstruction work. And worse, when local businesses closed or were sold due to shrinking markets and the lack of financial support, grants were made available to new owners. Even those workplaces where employees genuinely felt supported quickly refocussed to their own priorities, leaving men back at work sooner than they desired, and essentially on their own. Other men had retired before the fires but returned for economic reasons.

Four years on, some of the men still live in sheds, caravans and shipping containers. They spoke of relationships breaking down and feelings of impotence that lead to rage. Four of the 32 men reported feeling suicidal, with two of these planning to 'take out' others, too. Men spoke of acting to prevent others men's suicide attempts. Instances of bullying were recounted including aggressive interaction among men in community meetings that spilled into the streets. Family violence in other couples was observed by a third of the men, though personal experience was not reported.

Risks Black Saturday Posed and the Risks Men Took looks through the lens of gendered risk, both to the men interviewed and to their intimate partners, and others around them. The fire cost 100 males and 73 females their lives, a gender difference that, until Black Saturday, was closing in Australian bushfires (Haynes et al., 2008). Actively involved in emergency rescue of

I was ... that far from assaulting somebody one night, I just was ready to drag him across the table at a meeting in public and beat the crap out of him.

~

I think for myself and ... other blokes, it's only just below the surface ... And it doesn't take much poking with a sharp stick for it to bubble out. I find that ...that there might be something that happens, just some little thing and I'll just lose it.

~

It was definitely threatening. Verbal abuse and physical abuse as well.... [Even] with a person who I'd known for the best part of 10 years. I was challenging him on a particular issue that he was taking a leadership role in, and that exploded into violence.

~

We'd get rolling drunk and terribly stoned and talk. For hours and hours and hours about it, and I think I consciously did my processing then, in that moment where everyone's bonded and connected and able to hear strange things from other people. I was able to just be honest about how I felt and what I thought.

~

I feel it's quite stupid of me to be emotional or showing such emotion even after all this time when I recall it ... I feel it's a weakness ... I'm sure that a woman could get away with it a lot easier than a man.

~

If you're talking about men and fighting bushfires, never forget there's a fair bit of ego in it for them. There is.

people, pets, and livestock, those on the front line were hard hit. The men interviewed described physical injuries sustained in the fires and their aftermath, the feeling of imminent death, exhaustion, trauma and the challenge they felt of managing their emotions, including at community meetings when demonstrations of dominance by other men were often manifest. Those unable or unwilling to conform to prevailing gender norms were often judged to fail as men. For volunteer and employed fire-fighters, the perception that they had 'not coped' challenged their future roles within the CFA or the Department of Sustainability and Employment (DSE, now DEPI); like the women who felt compelled to 'suck it up and act like a wife and mother', men had to 'suck it up and act like a man'. Men's health was jeopardised in some instances through their denial of hurt and reluctance to seek help. Several became withdrawn and reclusive, and two gained weight through disordered eating habits. Alcohol and illicit drug use, reckless driving and extreme sports temporarily relieved most men's suffering in a way that was acceptable to the prevailing masculine norm, and over-work was common.

What helped them through this period? Considerable material resources had been made available to the men, but the men found them wanting. Often they saw the counselling services as better suited to women, and they suggested alternatives such as community-based, low-cost or free services held at flexible times that they could attend casually. Talking while 'doing something' seemed easier, especially when men worked alongside other men. There is limited value in providing 'support' if it imposes requirements that effectively render it inaccessible.

A concluding section relates the findings back to broader social inequalities and opportunities around gender, building on the findings and international research. It points out barriers to men recovering fully and alternative approaches informed by gender analysis that can address these barriers. The evidence-based proposals for change in the Action Recommendations could increase public safety in disasters and promote the long-term recovery of male responders and survivors and those they love. In order to relieve men of the unreasonable expectations masculinity demands of them in everyday life and in crises such as natural disasters, these broader cultural norms centred on gender can and must be challenged. Women and children, too, stand to benefit.

> *Pursuing 'ideal' masculinity has negative effects on men's health, their perception of risk, and on their responses to disasters. The effects of this masculinity were clearly evident in the Black Saturday bushfires as well as in other disasters. In order to mitigate the effects on men, women and children in future disasters and everyday life, the construction of masculinity must be addressed.*
>
> *Men, Masculinity, Disaster: A Literature Review (Online)*

Why gender? Why men? The work of leading masculinity theorist Raewyn Connell informs this study's social constructionist approach to masculinity (2005). The broader masculinity literature, too, finds no single dominant form of manliness but culturally- and historically-specific forms of hegemonic (ideal) masculinity against which men are measured. Gender scholar Bob Pease (2010) further points to a hierarchy of privilege empowering middle class, heterosexual, able-bodied white men who are able and willing to live up to the prevailing norms of heterosexuality, aggression, authority, courage, decision-making, rationality, emotional control, muscular prowess, risk-taking, dominance, and violence (Austin, 2008; Kahn, 2011; Pease, 2010, p. 88).

Further, rural life in Australia tends to be highly patriarchal and the division between men's and women's roles in the male-dominated family is particularly strong. A recent study of Australian attitudes to bushfire found that the myth of the (male) bushfire volunteer remained strong; employed women with child-care responsibilities had little time for bushfire preparation, and their exclusion contributed both to the masculinisation of this work and to the subsequent reinforcement of rural hegemonic masculinity (Eriksen & Gill, 2010; Eriksen, Gill, & Head, 2010). Additional national research on disaster-related violence against women by intimate male partners established increased risk to women and a complex set of contributing factors (Parkinson, 2012; Sety, 2012).

This study contributes to research on the gendered terrain of disaster (Enarson, 2012; Enarson & Morrow, 1998). Overall, while disasters can empower some individuals, living up to 'ideal' hegemonic masculinity can have negative effects – on men's health, their perception of risk, their responses to disasters, and reluctance to seek support – thereby ultimately inhibiting men's long-term recovery.

What's new or further confirmed in this research?

Disaster impacts can be severe and long-lasting.

Men do talk about their disaster experiences – just ask them.

Men, in particular, may be penalised for seeking psychological help.

Employment issues post-disaster are often a major source of disruption.

Community aggression and male violence increase.

Alcohol abuse, mental health issues, and even suicide arise in the aftermath.

Gender norms are more salient after disaster and can harm both men and women.

Implications for Policy and Practice: Action Recommendations

This policy-directed research leads to action recommendations directed to National, State and Local Government, to organisations responding to disaster and emergency planning, and to community members across Australia. Four core areas for increased gender awareness are identified.

1.   Reduce gender stereotyping

1.1 In disaster training and best-practice social change campaigns, raise awareness that the way men and women act and interact reflects social conditioning and pressure to conform, and this:

    1.1.1 Can increase harm to men through their larger front-line roles in disasters;

    1.1.2 Can increase harm to men after disaster through responses including aggression, violence or risk-taking behaviours;

    1.1.3 Can disadvantage and endanger women both during and after disasters through their larger responsibility for children in disaster; greater risk of violence to them and their children after disaster; and greater vulnerability to economic insecurity;

1.2 Offer education for men to understand how their sense of (masculine) self may be threatened in disasters, targeting disaster-affected communities and those at risk; incorporate analysis of power based on gender, where men reflect on challenging other men as appropriate;

1.3 Develop, fund, and promote gender-appropriate counselling for men that takes masculinity issues into account, including in crisis situations such as natural disasters;

1.4 Offer training in fire preparedness to women including use of chainsaws and fire-fighting equipment to promote shared responsibilities, understanding and fire-fighting skills in families;

1.5 Increase options for men to share equally in care, e.g. shared parental leave, improved access to child care and equal pay;

1.6 Anticipate potential increases in self-destructive coping mechanisms and in family violence by providing dedicated funding for disaster-related violence prevention, response, and recovery;

1.7 Broaden Men's Shed activities and similar programs to include outreach to younger men, art, music and other activities, including conversation on critical preparedness and recovery;

1.8 Research effective ways to address gender norms that may restrict men from seeking help; research effective psychosocial support strategies for application in disasters.

2.   Reduce vulnerability of emergency services workers and other first responders

2.1 Strive to include equal numbers of women at all levels in emergency service organisations;

2.2 Institute immediate post-disaster counselling for emergency service workers, with extension to family members as needed, prioritising male-dominated organisations; and embed within a culture of reflection and support that is open to emotional expression;

2.3 Offer alternative work roles and shorter, flexible hours to all disaster-affected staff, with specific recognition of men's competing work, family, and community responsibilities ;

2.4 Educate men in peer support, allowing men to take the lead in helping other men through long-term recovery; promote these through social marketing using effective antiviolence campaign models;

2.5 Research effective gender and disaster awareness packages and incorporate broadly in emergency response trainings across the sector, prioritising men's self-care and safety.

3. Improve individual support for survivor physical, mental and emotional health

3.1 Broaden options for gender-aware psychological and social supports to help reduce stigma and ensure that alternatives to one-on-one counselling are available;

3.2 Establish and resource a peer support program and network to better identify and reach those who are most socially isolated, and foster mutual learning, self-help, and collective self- reliance;

3.3 Establish community-based action-oriented programs, e.g. around hazard mitigation, where trust is built in teams involving labour and where social development opportunities arise incidentally;

3.4 Establish drop-in health services along the lines of past well-women's clinics, with specialists in men's, women's, and children's health and resources for disaster planning, response, and recovery;

3.5 Ensure that support services and social options operate at a range of times to allow access by those unavailable from 9am to 5pm.

3.6 Develop policy allowing police, fire-fighters and other emergency service workers to return post-disaster event to their families, backfilling with out-of-region personnel where required;

3.7 Establish a disaster help-line for psycho-social support including gender-specific and family violence training of helpline staff and volunteers, promoting and implementing this through traditional and emerging communication media and prioritising gender training by and for men;

3.8 Establish under state and/or federal auspices a National Preferred Provider Register of disaster trauma practitioners who have been determined to have a sound understanding of gender equity and family violence concerns in disaster contexts;

3.9 Reduce abuse of alcohol and drugs post-disaster by choosing alcohol-free premises for events, holding some 'alcohol free' disaster recovery events in affected communities, and publicly identifying the risks that disaster-related substance abuse poses to both women and men, modelling effective mental health awareness campaigns;

3.10 Research, trial and implement a sustained social marketing campaign to proactively educate the public on disasters 'through men's eyes' and 'through women's eyes,' modelled on effective mental health awareness campaigns.

4. Offer equal opportunities and respect to all disaster survivors

4.1 Identify and utilise the skills and assets of local men and women in the reconstruction phase, e.g. through preference to local subcontractors;

4.2 Employ local men and women in paid reconstruction work and support roles, and offer a gradual and supported return to work such as that provided by the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service;

4.3 Consider targeting support and compensation to small businesses owned by local, disaster-affected men and/or women, as well as compensation to local owner-builders who were unable to self-insure tools and materials;

4.4 Implement required gender awareness training systemically across disaster case management.

4.5 Ensure comprehensive training (including family violence training) for emergency recovery workers;

4.6 Research independently and retrospectively the fairness of recovery grants to ensure equitable support, especially among those men most vulnerable to the economic impacts of disasters. Use the findings of this audit to develop improved grant guidelines for both men and women.

Context and aims

Natural disasters by definition are disruptive and destructive events that both challenge and reveal everyday realities (among others, see Wiser, Blaikie, Cannon, & Davis, 2003). Catastrophic disasters cause immense damage to the natural and built environment, causing death, injury and displacement. In the immediate aftermath, and often for many months, societal infrastructure is absent or limited. It is increasingly clear that in their aftermath, along with each individual's loss, familial and community relationships are at risk of significant and sustained damage. Following the devastating Buffalo Creek flood disaster in the US, sociologist Kai Erikson wrote (1976, p. 305):

> *The community (what remains of it) seems to have lost its most significant quality – the power it gave people to care for one another in moments of need, to console one another in moments of distress, and to protect one another in moments of danger.*

In the intervening decades, much has been learned about human experience and community impact in disasters. The experiences of the 32 men who informed this research have much to add to the discourse on disasters and their social impacts. Critically, the research exposed myths about men, including 'men won't talk'. In fact, men quickly responded to the invitation to participate in this research and spoke openly and generously. The challenge is to ask, listen, and act. Learning from these men – and from gender and disaster researchers around the world – will contribute to the health

and wellbeing of individuals and communities, and thereby advance the outcomes sought by the Council of Australian Governments in their disaster resilience strategy. [3]

Why gender? Why men?

Emergency management is both highly male-dominated, and is a sector in which hyper-masculinity is celebrated, as it is the broader Australian society. When research on women's experiences after Black Saturday, 'The Way He Tells It', was launched in March 2012, Deputy Commissioner of Victoria Police, Tim Cartwright observed first hand:

> *As a man standing before you here in uniform, it saddens me to think that one of the greatest challenges of dealing with family violence is our own concept of masculinity, and I saw that again and again in the research that I read. This is about men being men, as they see themselves, as we see ourselves, in response to disasters. The implications are that in public we are strong and fearless and not affected, but the implications for many women is when we come home, we don't cope at all. The women, as invariably the closest to these people, suffer. We see increased family violence, we see kids exposed to increased family violence, we see increases in alcohol consumption, in drug consumption, break downs of all sorts, reductions in employment. There is much to be seen, much to be learnt from the research, even as small as it is, there is much more we can do to explore this environment.*

The findings of this original research, with its particular focus on gender violence, were shared at the 2012 first national conference on natural disasters and family violence, *Identifying the Hidden Disaster.*[4] After this event, and related speaking events throughout Victoria in March, emergency management personnel and others consistently asked for information on men's distinct experiences of disaster and its aftermath.

Two specific aims informed the project: First, we sought to document men's experiences of the Black Saturday fires and post-disaster recovery period, including harmful behaviours to themselves and those around them. Secondly, with respect to the growing subfield of gender and disaster, we build upon prior women-focused research in order to promote a gender-sensitive approach to disaster management that supports the positive long-term recovery of all.

The report explores why and to what extent response and recovery services failed to engage men in the recovery phase and proposes alternative approaches. In this regard, our work echoes the National Strategy for Disaster Resilience which notes that 'building disaster resilience requires sustained behavioural change across the entire community' and that it is important to share lessons learnt from previous disasters (COAG, 2011, p. 14). Individuals, families, and communities stand to benefit from expanded knowledge about men and masculinity in disaster, along with the planning, response and recovery organisations that struggle to effectively help men and their families in the aftermath.

The context for this research is the Black Saturday bushfires on 7th February 2009 which were unprecedented in Australia in their impact. The fires left 173 people dead, 414 injured and 7000 homeless. More than 11,000 farm animals were killed or injured, and

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[3] Just Ask: A Conference on the Experiences of Men After Disaster was held in Melbourne, November 26, 2013. For proceedings, see http://www.whealth.com.au/environmentaljustice/men/
[4] http://www.whealth.com.au/history_events_hiddendisasterconference_2012.html

430,000 hectares of bushland destroyed, along with native animals and birds (Borrell & Boulet, 2009; Lancaster, 2009). The social impacts of this event have been amply described elsewhere so we focus here is on gender-specific findings.

Volume 1 summarises the research process and its core findings, and proposes Action Recommendations. Volume 2 foregrounds the men's descriptions and perceptions of Black Saturday. Allowing men to speak for themselves, it begins with personal descriptions of the firestorm that raged on Black Saturday, and then captures what many consider to be the equally damaging period of the aftermath, with its layered and interacting effects on health and wellbeing, manifestly lasting well into the fourth year of 'recovery.' Following these descriptive sections, we then take a more analytic approach, considering the concept of risk, both the risk the fire posed to men and the risk they in turn posed to others. The men then speak on the effectiveness of the various support options they sought. The final section draws on international findings and these particular men's experiences to consider alternative service models that may improve responses to men and hence to those with whom they share their lives.

Importantly, the terminology used by researchers in this report follows that used by the men who speak here, including such words as 'depression', 'anxiety', 'trauma' and 'post-traumatic stress disorder.' The terms were used by men in a colloquial, conversational sense, rather than as diagnoses, and used this same way in the report. Similarly, as readers bring different perspectives, such terms in emergency management as 'recovery', 'risk' and 'resilience' may be equally contested. 'Recovery', for example, is thought by many to be too passive and regressive, with 'renewal' and 'regeneration' preferred. Again, this report retains the words used by the men interviewed.

The knowledge base on men and disaster

Writing of the new gender and disaster subfield generally, American sociologist Elaine Enarson writes:

> *Sex and gender shape men's lives before, during and after disasters. While gender relations typically empower men as decision makers with more control than women over key resources, gender identities and gender norms can also increase their vulnerability. (Enarson, 2009 np)*

Although men's health and wellbeing are known to be jeopardised by unhealthy coping strategies post-disaster, the nature and extent of these effects are still poorly understood. Current disaster risk management practices do not incorporate a specific focus on men in disaster resilience work, and there is little on the effect of social construction of masculinity on disaster preparation and response (Tyler & Fairbrother, 2012). What has been suggested is that 'from Peru to Alaska, men cope through alcohol abuse and aggression' (Enarson & Phillips, 2008, p. 51). Indeed, the legacy of disasters for men may be a feeling of inadequacy at having failed to meet the expectations of manhood (Austin, 2008). Despite the significance of these findings and their implications for individual and family safety, and community recovery, there is a dearth of information in this area globally and, in particular, nationally.

In Volume 3 (online),[5] the extensive literature review supports and extends this analysis.

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[5] Download the literature review 'Men, Masculinity, Disaster' by Cathy Weiss, Claire Zara and Debra Parkinson, at www.whealth.com.au/environmentaljustice/men/

Research design and ethics

The research methodology was qualitative, inviting the men interviewed to speak frankly and in their own terms about their experiences and to capture their individual reflections and feelings. Ethics approval was received from both Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC) and North East Health HREC. The two primary researchers jointly conducted the interviews, one facilitating and the other taking responsibility for notes and group process as well as seeking further clarification or extension of responses. The interviews were digitally recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim. Four open-ended guiding research questions were pursued each asked in ways that allowed participants to lead the interview in new directions:

What were the effects on men's physical and mental health and wellbeing, if any, during and in the aftermath of the Black Saturday bushfires?

What were/are the implications of these effects for the safety and wellbeing of fire-affected men, and for those around them, including their intimate partners and families and work colleagues?

What personal, interpersonal, or institutional resources, if any, were available to them in the aftermath with respect to psychosocial effects?

What would have helped minimise or eliminate risk of harmful behaviours?

Sample recruitment and characteristics

Theoretical sampling was used to identify potential participants. This approach does not seek a statistically representative sample but a group that is selected purposively in order to flesh out particular concepts or theoretical points, in this case the missing gender perspective of men caught up in bushfire. The sample of 32 was self-selected. An advertisement was placed in each of the local newspapers, and recruitment flyers placed at key community centres in the communities of interest. In addition, community newspapers included the recruitment notice in their publications. Emergency management organisations and facilitators of men's groups and men's sheds posted the flyer on noticeboards and in newsletters. In addition, WHGNE used existing networks to increase 'word of mouth' awareness of the research opportunity. Potential participants were required to contact the research team at WHGNE on their own initiative to arrange an interview at a mutually agreed time and place. All participants were offered a voucher to the value of $100 toward the costs of attending and travelling to interviews.

The population of interest was defined as fire-affected men in the communities of Kinglake, Flowerdale, Marysville, Seymour, Alexandra and Yea. Men who were outside the shires of Mitchell or Murrindindi during the fires or their aftermath and males under the age of 18 were excluded, as were women. Thirty-two men were interviewed, ranging in age from 36 to 69 years, with a median of 14 years in residence. Only five of the 32 men interviewed were single on Black Saturday; 24 were married or in a settled relationship; and three had more casual or complicated relationships. In the four years between Black Saturday and the interview, there were four separations and two of the three more casual relationships had ended. Among the 32 were seven fire-fighters and five CFA fire-fighters who fought the fires on Black Saturday. One man was an SES volunteer. Other men had taken these volunteer roles in past years. The sample reflects the prevailing ethnic homogeneity of the local populations. (See Appendix 1 for more detail.)

Data collection and analysis

Data was collected through individual in-depth, semi-structured interviews (see Interview Schedule in Appendix 2). Modified grounded theory following Spradley's (1980) guided analysis. Grounded theory offers rules for data collection and analysis that minimise ethnocentrism in the attribution of meaning, combining the theoretical sampling and thematic analysis approach as developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Computer-assisted coding was conducted using the software package Nvivo V. 10. Coding validity was enhanced by the second researcher's careful reading following coding by the first researcher, and by participant checks. All those interviewed received a copy of their transcribed interview and were invited to amend it at their discretion.

Ethics procedures

When men phoned the researchers to express interest in the research, the Explanatory Statement was used to explain the project and its risks and benefits. The Explanatory Statement and Consent forms were then e-mailed or posted to them (see Appendix 3). Upon commencement of the interview a hard copy was provided and participants asked if they had read it carefully and had any questions before signing the Consent Form. Participants were asked to retain their copy of the Explanatory Statement as a record and provided with a Revocation of Consent Form.

Confidentiality concerns arise in the rural, post-disaster context so the limits of anonymity were frankly identified in these ethics document. As noted, participants were also able to review their interview transcript and amend or withdraw information from the report to further protect their confidentiality. Anonymity was enhanced by the use of pseudonyms in this report and by altering minor details that might have otherwise exposed context and hence identity. One sensitive line of inquiry in this research went to men's perceptions of their own harmful behaviours – both to themselves and to those around them. In considering the risks of participating, it was anticipated that some might be uncomfortable with this. Mitigating the risks, the open-ended, semi-structured interview schedule meant the participants effectively led the interview. They were advised during the consent procedure that they had the right to stop the interview at any time, and to refuse to answer any questions. To further reduce risk, each man was advised of his right to request post-research debriefing, and the options for this. Prior arrangements had been made with qualified counsellors not associated with the research team. Participants often benefit from contributing to research as it can offer the opportunity of speaking freely without advice or judgement. In these interviews, too, it seemed a cathartic experience for men to speak about their experiences and feelings. The men spoke for a minimum of two hours each and were open and generous in the sharing their information. Without exception, they articulated their appreciation of this opportunity to help others.

The research is limited in that no young men were interviewed, and there was little ethnic diversity as the sample reflects the ethnic composition of the shires of Mitchell and Murrindindi. Time constraints meant that data analysis was necessarily limited to domains that were relevant to the funding. The research questions and ethics approval cover a broader canvas and future funding could allow more analysis. One man requested a follow-up interview soon after his first, and all 32 men indicated they would be interested in another interview at a future time. This report reflects a first attempt to document men's perceptions of events on and after Black Saturday. More time to reflect and engage further with the men could be of value. Future research is indicated as the last recommendation in each of the four sections.