

LONG-TERM DISASTER RESILIENCE

This predominantly qualitative research into long-term disaster resilience identifies what helps and hinders individual and community resilience in disasters. It documents the experiences and wisdom of 56 disaster survivors nine years after the 2009 Black Saturday fires and up to 50 years after earlier fires and floods in Victoria, including the 1983 Ash Wednesday fires.

The purpose is to identify how individuals and communities understand the risk to long-term health and wellbeing that disaster experience brings, and how to promote resilience over decades.

‘IT’S VIVIDLY ETCHED IN MY BRAIN’

Experiences at the time of the disaster and the way the immediate aftermath is managed have a profound effect on women’s and men’s resilience.

In ignorance, people ask, ‘Aren’t you over it yet?’ Five words that judge another person’s lack of resilience and convey failure. This question was asked of survivors only weeks after disasters and continues to be asked.

‘OH THEY JUST NEED TO GET OVER IT’. THAT’S NOT WHAT YOU SAY TO PEOPLE WHO ARE STILL IN THAT DISTRESSED PTSD STATE’

In reality, there was no getting over it. The seeds of long-term disaster resilience are planted in the immediate post-disaster period, and some informants believed that their positive life circumstances before the disaster also helped in their recovery afterwards. Having a good relationship, a supportive extended family, employment, insurance or sufficient money beforehand offered them some ballast and resources to survive a tumultuous time. How people are situated in relation to class privilege also brings benefits.

What predominantly helped was people. Their kindness stayed with survivors long after, giving them something to believe in – a society that they were part of.

‘THERE WAS SO MUCH GENEROSITY FROM THE AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC ... I KNEW THAT JUST ABOUT THE ENTIRETY OF THE AUSTRALIAN POPULATION SAT DOWN AT THE BOTTOM OF THAT DARK WELL WITH ME, BARRACKING FOR ME, BARRACKING FOR MY CHILDREN, BARRACKING FOR MY TOWN.’

What happens in the disaster and its aftermath sets the scene for long-term disaster resilience. As communities move through the stages of disaster from prevention through to long-term resilience, the nature of their communities, and the people in them, change. Wholesale population change occurred in the worst-affected towns. Even years later, people left, no longer able to recognise the community they loved as a result of the rifts and pain of the long aftermath. Their community appeared to be split between people with disaster memories and burdens, and new-comers unaware of what had happened in the disaster. Anecdotally, informants noted that deaths from heart disease and cancer increased afterwards, the connection to bushfire or flood suspected by many. Violence against women and children increased.

Many informants spoke of their disaster-affected area being immediately inundated with media coverage. Journalists sought out ‘sooty heroes and victims with babes in arms’, and politicians addressed the media in terms of ‘community spirit’ and ‘Australian resilience’, whilst people looked on, devastated at their loss.

‘LOTS OF LIGHTS AND SIRENS ... MEDIA AND ... POLITICIANS, AND LOTS OF THINGS HAPPEN IN THAT INITIAL COUPLE OF WEEKS. RECOVERY ITSELF IS VERY QUIET. VERY, VERY QUIET AND A BIT LONELY’.

WHAT’S NEW OR FURTHER CONFIRMED IN THIS RESEARCH?

- Concepts of resilience are complex and contradictory
- Disaster impacts can be severe and long-lasting.
- Trust in institutions is lost through ‘cosmetic’ community consultation
- Lives are lost through assumptions in fire plans that men are protectors and women are nurturers
- Children’s rights are compromised in disasters and family obligations can endanger lives
- Men face career penalties when seeking counselling



These RECOMMENDATIONS are drawn from a comprehensive list in the report. They are for National, State and Local Government, for organisations responding to disaster and emergency planning agencies, and for community members in fire-prone areas across Australia.

1. Improve and extend disaster plans.
2. Reinstate essential services for individuals after disasters ASAP.
3. Review access to pets and livestock.
4. Educate Australians through ongoing Community Service Announcements (CSAs).
5. Educate politicians and journalists to acknowledge the grief and loss of disaster-affected communities, and more accurately portray women and men.
6. Review and extend training opportunities for community leaders
7. Ensure disaster-affected employees have access to (and are aware of how to access) confidential support.
8. Address community-wide trauma after disaster.
9. Educate children on how disaster experiences can affect survivors and the importance of sensitivity towards them in the aftermath.
10. Review grant processes, and planning and building regulations
11. Promote awareness of increased domestic and family violence in disaster and improve response from emergency services, support services and the community.
12. Adopt the National Gender and Emergency Management Guidelines and implement Gendered Violence and Lessons in Disaster training.

'ALTHOUGH EVERY POLITICIAN IN AUSTRALIA CAME AND VISITED US AND WANTED TO HAVE THEIR PHOTO OPPORTUNITY AND MADE PROMISES, [THEY] WENT AWAY AND DID NOTHING.'

'I WAS THE FATHER FIGURE AND THEY HAD ME TO LEAN ON, OR FELT I WAS THEIR PROTECTOR.'

'IT WAS THE WOMEN WHO WERE EXPECTED TO ACCESS CENTRELINK HELP AND KEEP AN EYE ON THE WASHING AND CLEANING UP AND KNOW WHERE THE KIDS ARE.'

'I'M NOT LEAVING THE PROPERTY... I WILL DIE BEFORE I GO BACK THROUGH THAT AGAIN.'

'THE KIDS DID COP A FAIR BIT ... AND IT WOULD BE QUITE RANDOM ... HE MADE MY SON HOLD [OUR DOG] WHILE HE PUNCHED HER.'

'I THOUGHT YOU WERE MORE OF A MAN THAN THAT.'

'IF THERE'S A PERCEIVED WEAKNESS, BANG, GO FOR IT. GET RID OF THEM.'

'HE'D BEEN A BRIGHT AND SUNNY KID AND HE BECAME DARK AND MOROSE.'

'SHE DIDN'T FINISH HIGH SCHOOL ... COMPLETELY THROWN OFF HER AMBITIONS.'

[RE. COMMUNITY CONSULTATION] 'YOU WERE ASKED WHAT YOU WANTED, WE JUST CHOSE TO IGNORE YOU'.

'WE MOVE TO A VERY SIMPLE BLACK AND WHITE JUDGEMENT WAY OF THINKING.'

Resilience may be a mix of individual characteristics, intersections of privilege, and the legacy of a lifetime's experience. It is equally a twist of fate, and the difference between surviving with resilience, and not, appears to lie outside the survivors themselves. In acknowledging that long-term resilience is premised on effective disaster prevention and management, it sits with government to provide expert advice on areas of safe human habitation, and after disaster to promptly re-establish essential services. It sits with Australian women, men and children – led by those involved in emergency management – to engage in explicit discussions of gendered expectations, realistic expectations of government services, and human rights in the disaster context. Underpinning resilience is the central importance of empathy and kindness.

