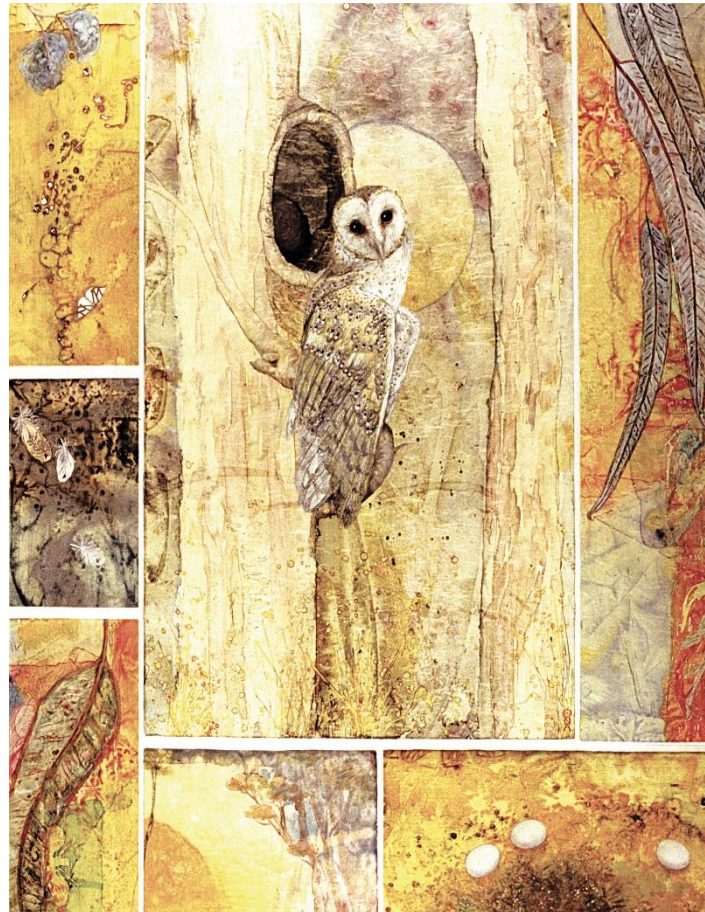


Long-term disaster resilience



Vol. 1 Executive Summary and Recommendations

Vol. 2 Long-term disaster resilience: Full report

Vol. 3 Long-term disaster resilience: Literature review



Gender & Disaster Pod
An initiative of WHGNE, WHIN & MUDRI

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Long-term disaster resilience

Vol. 1 Executive Summary and Recommendations





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*It's vividly etched in my brain.
(Suzanne)¹*

~

Everything changed. Absolutely everything. The way you look at life...the way you deal with crises, the way you look at the future, the way you deal with your children and understanding. And also the way you see the world and your role in it. Everything. (Lena)

~

The thing is, [47 years later], I could smell it, I could feel it. My body had that burning feeling as if the whole of my body was back in that experience. I was safe ... but you can smell it and feel it and see it. And it's almost as if the room disappeared and you're back there. (Barbara)

~

I felt that I was screaming inside. (Alexia)

~

I don't know if things have ever been totally OK again. (Elizabeth)

~

Then you've got areas like where I live that it should be a case of, 'Well you should only be living there if you really need to live there because it is inherently quite dangerous'. (Warren)

~

Recovery has some really unpleasant, difficult, dark moments in it and people don't really want to see that. (Melissa)

~

The 30th anniversary was interesting in that we all came together as a community and we realised there was a bit of a cancer cluster among the community, which I know has been the case with Black Saturday survivors too. (Melissa)

Introduction

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.

Critical issues faced by survivors in the first two or three years were omitted or mentioned only in passing in this long-term research. These were issues such as drug and alcohol use, temporary housing, and frustrating levels of bureaucracy associated in rebuilding. Now, having overcome these issues, what stayed with survivors in the long-term – also covered in the early research (*The Way He Tells It & Men on Black Saturday*)² – related to reflections on the impact of the experience to themselves, their family and community. Relationships with, and trust in, the institutions that shape and underpin society were shaken, changing future actions and beliefs.

It is clear from the interviews that 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.

The literature review identified the dearth of scholarship in long-term disaster resilience, and this study begins to address this absence. It is unique in capturing the voices of disaster survivors, as informants spoke of disaster events nine, 10, 30 or 50 years in the past. Memories swiftly took them back to the day and the way they felt. The disaster experience unsettled women, men and children at the time, and the memory of the anxiety – if not the anxiety itself – remains. Disaster trauma appeared to act like a dormant infection, breaking out throughout people's lives, affecting resilience.

A 'cumulative toll' came from other spheres as well as the disaster. The way women and men had integrated previous defeats and successes shaped the way they approached and dealt with the disaster at hand. Informants related prior experience of trauma – through a lifetime of abuse, combat in war overseas, 'stabblings, shootings' and massacres on Australian soil, and of attending one tragic road accident after another.

Other traumatic life events and mental and physical ill-health contribute. Class, gender, rurality, race, sexuality and ability all impact on capacity for 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 bushfires through to earlier fires and floods in Victoria back to a 1943 Tarrawingee fire, and including the 1983 Ash Wednesday fires. The purpose is to

¹ Pseudonyms have been used in this report with one exception, where an informant wanted her real name used.

² Throughout this report, reference is made to our previous reports, *The Way He Tells It and Men on Black Saturday*, available <https://www.genderanddisaster.com.au/info-hub/research-resources/>

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.

The commonality across every demographic - age, gender, place in society, type of disaster – is the indelible mark left by catastrophic disaster on the people who were caught up in it. Reading the words of people who survived disasters as they remember their experiences and reflect on their resilience in the years since is deeply moving. Two young people pulled out of the interview on the day because the emotion was too raw – almost ten years on.

I don't think you can put a pin in and say it's over. (Seth)

How to read this report

This report is presented in three volumes
www.genderanddisaster.com.au:

- Vol. 1 Executive Summary and Recommendations
- Vol. 2 Long-term disaster resilience: Full report
- Vol. 3 Long-term disaster resilience: Literature review (MUDRI)

This report consciously focuses on the lived experience of long-term disaster resilience, to give individuals a voice in a field generally reserved for the emergency management sector.

Methodology

Ethics approval was granted through the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC), and an Advisory Group was established, meeting four times over the 15 months of the project. The research question underpinning this research is: 'What factors increase or hinder long-term individual and community disaster resilience?' Specific aims are:

- To document men's, women's, volunteers' and children's (at the time) insights and experiences of resilience in the aftermath of disasters
- To contribute to an emerging knowledge-base on long-term individual and community disaster resilience for men, women, volunteers and children
- To contribute to ongoing policy development and implementation across Australia, and ultimately to a more resilient society.

The sample of 56 comprised 30 women and 26 men (aged between 18 and 93 years). One in four were volunteers. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 32 individuals and three couples, and there were 3 focus groups (of 5, 6 and 6 people). Of the 56, ten were by telephone and 46 face-to-face. Disaster experiences included both fire and flood, when significant in magnitude or effect. Experiences included rural, remote or urban disasters (including the 2003 Canberra bushfires). The timespan was from eight years ago (e.g. 2011 floods, 2009 fires) to floods in 1974 and bushfires in 1962, 1951 and 1943 (see Maps in Vol. 2 for full details). Seven informants had experiences of more than one disaster.

Modified Grounded Theory guided analysis and NVivo 12 assisted coding. Validity was enhanced by two researchers coding and developing nodes, and by participant checks.

Although the final sample of 56 informants was diverse in a great many aspects, it did not include people of diverse gender and sexual identities, or First Nations people, and there was little cultural or linguistic diversity. It is probable that this research did not engage those who were not coping as a result of their disaster experience. Future research to extend our knowledge of long-term disaster resilience is clearly vital.

Sample of 56

*Gender:
30 women and 26 men*

*Age:
18 to 94*

*Disaster type:
Bushfires and floods from
1943 to 2011*

*Location:
Rural, remote and urban
Across Victoria and Canberra*

*One in four were volunteers
Seven experienced more than
one disaster*

*Limitation:
No self-identified ethnic
diversity, or gender and sexual
identity diversity.*

*Interviews:
10 –Telephone
46 – Face-to-Face*

I don't know that you can put resilience down to any one thing. I think it's a combination of a whole range of things. (Alexia)

~

Resilience depends on what else is happening in your life and I guess as you get older it's more difficult to cope with everything ... You're also very aware of the work involved and thinking, 'Gosh have I got the stamina to be able to cope with this again?' (Janet)

~

I used to think that we were more resilient or tougher than we actually turned out to be. I mean this event knocked us around more than I thought it would. (Eric)

~

People think being a pessimist is bad - well it's not - it can save your life (Ruth)

~

There's sort of that feeling that it's the gift we had to have. We made the most of it, because we want to see ourselves as resilient. (Kate)

~

You've just got to soldier on. (Michelle)

~

My brother and I are stronger and more resilient ... It's given us a sense of, 'We're here for a purpose' (Barbara)

~

I want to be better prepared, I don't want ... my family in danger again because people don't tell me what's going on. (Janet)

~

The thing about, 'What doesn't kill you make you stronger', that's a lie. It's not the truth because post-traumatic stress is cumulative. (Lena)

~

When that happens all your previous trauma shit comes back like a dam bursting. So you're straight back to square one. (Seth)

Concept and definition of resilience

Throughout this research project, we used the term, 'resilience' simply and as it is generally understood, for example, as defined by the Cambridge Dictionary:

'The ability to be happy, successful, etc. again after something difficult or bad has happened.' (Dictionary, n.d.)

In the Resilience Scale, we asked informants to think of 'resilience' as the 'capacity to survive, adapt and thrive despite your disaster experience' (adapted from www.100resilientcities.org). This simple approach is used in full awareness that the concept of resilience is highly contested, as are other words used in a disaster context, such as 'recovery', 'natural' and 'vulnerability'. One reason for the polarity of the term 'resilience' is that it suggests responsibility for resilience sits with disaster survivors, justifying reduced services to people who are already 'surviving and navigating their unevenly borne burdens of capitalist globalization' (Derickson, 2016, p. 162). Resilience can be a judgement of individuals by government and society. A key theme in the narratives of the 56 informants to this research is of feeling judged and silenced when people ask, 'Aren't you over it yet?' The question infers a lack of resilience.

Other reasons for controversy include that the term is understood and extensively theorised by many disciplines, e.g. engineering, geography and psychology. Cote and Nightingale (2012) reflect that resilience thinking 'has mainly evolved through the application of ecological concepts to society, problematically assuming that social and ecological system dynamics are essentially similar' (p. 475). The desire to 'cut across academic disciplines and the interface between science, policy and practice' by use of the word, resilience, is said by Weichselgartner and Kelman (2015, p. 249) to hold 'an inherent danger that the term becomes an empty signifier that can easily be filled with any meaning to justify any specific goal'. (See also, Ungar, 2011, 2013)

The literature review conducted by MUDRI states:

Resilience has no universally agreed definition as a systematic literature review determined in its analysis of definitions about community resilience related to disasters. No evidence of a commonly agreed definition of community resilience exists (Ostadtaghizadeh, 2015). By adding 'long-term', this definitional conundrum became even more complicated, which had a tendency to conflate with recovery as Camilleri (2007) noted. (Vol. 3, p. 9)

Melissa referred to it as a 'hot topic', saying, 'I think getting a handle on what is resilience has proved really difficult'. Feeling less able to survive fire or flood, and protect property and loved ones, worried some survivors. Feeling older reduced their will to do it all again.

Informants' views of resilience and the factors that contribute to it were frequently contradictory. Family support and community connections were said by informants to be critical to their resilience, others noted that ultimately, they were on their own.

It is interesting that some pointed to a happy childhood and some to a deprived childhood as the reason for their resilience. A positive outlook was essential for some, but defensive pessimism was also seen as potentially life-saving. Having options contributes to resilience, yet some informants saw their lack of choice as forcing their apparent resilience. Forbearance was inferred by those who remembered having no choice – one being forced to keep going by her role as Mayor, needed by the community, and another by her role as single mother, needed by her child. A farmer with 40 kilometres of fencing to replace laughed off notions that he would leave the farm, saying, 'You do what needs to be done'.

Some felt the weight of the 'cumulative toll' of trauma throughout life, reducing resilience bit by bit. In contrast, others felt stronger as a result of what they had done in the disaster, that they understood their reactions better, and that it offered a reason for their existence. Ironically, some identified previous disaster experience as the reason for their resilience in later disasters.

Findings

Part 1: Perceptions of disasters' significance

Revisiting what happened

Any consideration of what constitutes recovery or resilience must be premised on a thorough knowledge of what people experienced. There was chaos for many in bushfires through limited visibility, ember attacks, and for those who tried to leave late, there were often traffic jams, convoys heading in one direction, only to be turned in the opposite direction. Wind changes and multiple fire fronts removed any certain escape. Flood waters silently invaded homes, with rushing water and heavy rain impeding escape. Whether fighting the fires or caught unaware by the fires or floods, 27 informants felt close to death.

Long-term impacts on resilience

The consequences of catastrophic disasters were broad, deep and long-lasting. Financially, some never recovered. Many informants lost careers, or left relationships, communities, or their church. One left Australia permanently. Disaster experience changed the course of lives.

The physical health of survivors was affected by injuries during disaster events, and increased chronic illness in the aftermath. After floods, residual mould was linked to respiratory illness. Contaminated water caused immediate health problems in infections and fever. After bushfires, informants drew a link between the chronic and life-threatening illnesses that emerged in the following years and their disaster experience. Anecdotally, informants noted that deaths from heart disease and cancer increased in their disaster-affected communities, the connection to bushfire or flood suspected by many.

*There was that terrifying moment [in the flood water] in a small car that stalled ... I couldn't turn back, I had no choice ... it was horrifying.
(Livianna)*

~

*I'm standing in the driveway getting everybody in the car ... the fire was 200 or 300 feet in the air, just arcing up over the top of us like this and roaring like several 707s ... We literally drove through the fire ... in front of us it was all on fire.
(Suzanne)*

~

We ended up in the spot at night time where the two fronts met. There's a plantation there so the fire came out of the plantation from the south and then also came out of the bush reserve from the north and it surrounded us. So there was probably about four [CFA] units and we couldn't get out, we were totally surrounded. (Murray)

~

They got a great big army truck in to evacuate the people who'd been standing in the water all night ... it started to go across the floodway there, and it started to tip ... The driver panicked and turned it into the flood water and didn't know there's a great big culvert there and went nose first down this culvert with the whole back of this army truck full of people. (Michelle)

~

We'd travel along one way and then people would go, 'No, we can't go that way because there's fires up there' and then we'd turn back and they'd go, 'No, we can't go this way'. So it was really chaotic and confusing. (Hannah)

~

After that '96 flood [I] needed about a \$10,000 injection of fertiliser to get things back on track but I never had the money ... It put me off the farm eventually ... The bank wouldn't lend any more money and I had to make a decision to sell up to cover debt. (Jim)

Four years after that fire happened I got diagnosed with Parkinson's disease and I really wonder about whether or not something in that environment that we went through was a trigger. (Cameron)

~

Along the road of the fire front ... maybe every second or third house someone there had developed a chronic illness and quite a few people in the past few years since then have died of cancer. (Ruth)

~

Lots of people... are going through PTSD & suicide as a result of what happened in 2009. (Annie)

~

Watching the people around me so grief-stricken, the burden the community members and my family were feeling. It's grief and loss, and it's destabilisation. (Kate)

~

I did know of some community leaders that, through stages of grief like shock, denial and anger, that in the anger stage some people would take that out on the nearest targets which could be the community leaders stepping up. (Ruth)

~

I couldn't get through to Gary. He was in his tough man role. Took me a year to get through ... There was this divide and you just watched it everywhere, in every family, in every society, every area like Kinglake and here. (Annie)

~

Amy told me that he had hit her in the head a few times for no good reason – the reason for her escape seasonal working. He denied this but I did witness him cornering her and kicking her on one occasion ... He fought with the sons - physical punch ups which he hadn't done before. (Alexia)

~

The kids did cop a fair bit, not as much as me, and it would be quite random ... the other son got a smack on the face... The dog copped it as well. The dog copped it a fair bit. He punched it for burying dog food in the garden, quite severely. And made my other son, hold her while he punched her. (Lena)

Equally, deaths from suicide were observed by informants, and seen as a consequence of the disaster and its aftermath. Mental health issues were community-wide. As whole communities took the force of the flames or the floods, survivors afterwards struggled to understand what had happened – to their sense of self, their partner, children, and community. And still, years on, the wider, unaffected community, continues to minimise and misunderstand long-term consequences of disaster experience.

Informants spoke of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and in less diagnostic terms of being traumatised, anxious, depressed, more fragile, stressed, tired and exhausted. Women and men changed under the weight of their experiences and memories.

To this day, triggers for unease or panic are found in the smell of smoke or dry gum leaves, black landscapes, helicopters overhead or warnings of Code Red Days or increasing flood levels.

Unpaid work carried by community leaders took a heavy toll as they juggled personal, family and community responsibilities to help with community resilience. There was a lack of practical and moral support for these leaders at a time of wholesale community disruption. As a result, they tended to withdraw and re-emerge in line with their capacity to contribute, and the ebbs and flows of their own resilience. Leaders were faced with community members' grief, anger and other heightened emotions, and were frequently blamed. Their standing within community relied on their empathy, availability, support – and their own resilience. In the years that followed, some faced ill-health and unemployment.

It is evident from informants and the literature review that community development pre-exists and follows disaster events and subsequent intervention from outside authorities. Support to individuals and agencies leading ongoing community development would increase resilience.

Relationship breakdown and domestic violence

Relationship breakdowns, even many years after, had roots in the disaster. For many, anger, neglect and pessimism resulting from the disaster experience broke down the fabric of family life.

Men's violence against women and children added immensely to the stress of the post-disaster period. Four informants spoke of violence against them or their children. Others through their own observations or roles, knew of domestic violence in their communities linked to Black Saturday. Informants spoke about violence against their children – not seen before the fires. There were longstanding consequences in family rifts from witnessing or being the brunt of their father's abuse.

Post-traumatic growth

Some informants saw positive outcomes from their disaster experience. Knowing their own strength in the disaster, and resilience since, has bolstered some survivor's confidence and sharpened feelings of empathy for others. Several couples became closer for the near-death experiences they shared.

A frequent response was the intention to be better informed and prepared for future disasters, and many informants outlined actions taken to achieve this. For some who were children in disasters, the experience led to an adulthood characterised by self-belief and leadership qualities.

However, as noted by one informant, this post-traumatic growth response is unlikely to include those who lost homes or people. The research itself may not have attracted people who felt an absence of resilience

Part 2: What helps and hinders resilience

What helped resilience

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.

After disaster, these same factors were key to resilience: emotional and practical support from others, financial support, returning to work or study, and connectedness in the community. Having financial and other resources provides an advantage in restoring property damage and giving options for housing, employment and other stressors. It is fundamental to understand that how people are situated in relation to class privilege also brings benefits, for example, in negotiations of grants, housing permits, insurance payouts, and other dealings with bureaucracy.

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.

Money

Money was critical, and grants changed over the decades, from no formal assistance in 1943, through to Black Saturday, 2009, with the overwhelming generosity of Australians. A return to work helped financially and this was frequently a priority for those affected by disaster. Where employers were flexible and colleagues empathic – at least for several months – this was valued. Having sufficient money and resources early after disasters clearly set the scene for long-term recovery and people's resilience.

That nearly broke me but now I think, 'If I can get through that I can get through anything'. (Josie)

~

There was so much generosity from the Australian public ... I knew that just about the entirety of the Australian population was sat down at the bottom of that dark well with me, barracking for me, barracking for my children, barracking for my town. (Kate)

~

To get out of my own bucket of shit and start to try and ... derive some meaning as far as helping to rebuild the town and making sure that others were getting the support that they needed – that was really important. (Kate)

~

The husband was about my size and he just divided his wardrobe in half. He just gave me half of everything he had, half his suits, half his shirts, half his underpants, just took his wardrobe and split it in half. (Mike)

~

They just opened their arms. They fed us for nothing and gave us something to drink. (Barbara)

~

There was practical and psychological and spiritual support ... At the recovery centres, there were different tables - it was a bit like speed dating, so you can go from table to table and see different people and they would give you the support that you needed. (Ruth)

~

Our insurance company was very, very, very good... So we had the wherewithal to rebuild most of our destroyed stuff pretty much straightaway. (Eric)

~

It's so important to have bloody good funding. (Kate)

It took me ages to get through that and had the counselling and [my counsellor] really talked me out of a dark hole. (Aaron)

~

I got a few sessions [with a psychologist] and that was particularly useful so I kept doing that. (Seth)

~

No-one understood in the medical profession what the trauma was doing to the whole community. (John)

~

[It's] an abnormal situation ... but you're all different how you experience it ... It started being this affirmation around behaviours not being pathologised. (Hannah)

~

[After three years] Drained, disillusioned, disappointed, frustrated, suffering ... Their world is upside down and everywhere they look, it's upside down. (Chloe)

~

The safety of being in a group of people who have experienced the same set of circumstances leads to a freedom of speaking that may not necessarily be there if you're a one-out, talking about something that's happened to you that no-one else has got any concept of. (Mike)

~

There are times when you try to talk about it and then you actually get into a group, express your feelings and literally be... a sounding board for others (Graeme)

~

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. (Eric)

~

What was amazing was the politicians that came in and blew their own trumpets and told everyone how good of a job they did – but then there was nothing. (Scott)

Emotional, social and psychological support

The importance of appropriate emotional support in the recovery process was acknowledged by many people as key to resilience. This support came from many sources including workplace counselling, professional guidance, group support and self-help, while others found helping others assisted in their own resilience. One informant drew on her professional life to advise not pathologising behaviours and instead 'acknowledging that trauma as part of who you are' (Hannah). Another pointed out that the context, post-disaster, for individuals trying to achieve psychological wellbeing is, in fact, community-wide struggling. Fortunately, rather than only pathologising and medicating individuals, there were some examples of professionals in the mental health field supporting social interventions and community strengthening initiatives to prevent and address mental health difficulties. This recognises disasters' impact on entire communities and regions.

Anniversaries allowed community-wide remembrance of shared experiences, grieving for loss, and finding some solace in individual and community resilience.

The techniques that people used to alleviate stress or otherwise help themselves recover were diverse – emphasising the individuality of the people interviewed. For example, people were helped by breathing exercises, yoga, reiki, tai chi, neurolinguistics, compartmentalising, focusing, and meditation. They benefited from therapies including music, gardening and dog or horse therapy. They used their hands to make mandalas. They healed through making art, writing and poetry.

Role of community in resilience

Informants identified that genuine community engagement and documented community planning before disaster relieve pressure in a community in the aftermath. Such planning can prevent community factions and reduce the tendency to blame community leaders in the aftermath, when stages of cohesion and fracture are known to follow disasters.

What hindered resilience?

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.

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

It is important to publicly recognise the devastating consequences that disaster often brings to survivors. Young and old informants felt let down by rhetoric and immediate promises of help that did not eventuate. Both government officials and media need to seriously acknowledge the loss and consequences of disaster.

Resilience relies on provision of baseline services beyond what an individual or family can achieve. Although somewhat of a shift back to self-reliance in disasters is inevitable, it must have limits. People have a right to expect some level of government help when at their most vulnerable. It was notable that while informant, Bert, did not remember government assistance in 1943, neither were there layers of bureaucracy that were problematic. In 2009, major tasks that were impossible for many individuals were not provided by government to all who needed them. Essentials such as power, food and water, and mobile connections could not be reinstated by individuals. Early re-establishment of essential services by government is fundamental to individuals' further progress in re-establishing their lives. This baseline and early work by government is vital to the resilience of disaster survivors.

Financial loss – and unfairness

Technicalities in grant and insurance eligibility meant some deserving people missed out on grants and insurance payouts. In disasters before 2009, donated money did not always reach people most in need. At a community level, the inequity of who received resources remains a hindrance to resilience.

Deep divides in community emerged through perceived unfairness of who received grants and who didn't, or who took resources they had no entitlement to. Even, those who were children in disasters were acutely aware of the politics of taking resources, needed or not.

Almost a decade after Black Saturday, the Class Action again raised questions of who received money and who did not. The families of the young people in the focus group had not participated in the class action, but informants spoke about knowing contemporaries who had received large payouts. While supportive of their parents' motives in protecting them from emotional harm, and respectful of their parents' philosophical position of recovering financial losses independent of payouts, they nevertheless reflected on a situation that seemed unfair.

Leading disaster psychologist, Dr Rob Gordon, urges understanding that it is not possible to ensure fairness in emergency situations, and it is equally not always possible to judge who is deserving (Gordon, 2013). In a 2013 video interview, Dr Gordon recalled that in the 1980's "getting material aid or actual assistance just was so difficult because the whole government approach was we need to make sure that nobody gets anything they are not entitled to. But what we have seen is a shift that this disenfranchises people who have an entitlement because it's too hard. So it's better to bias the thing in favour of a few people getting something they're not entitled to ... I don't think the small number people who take advantage of the situation is going to actually mean that anyone who really deserves it didn't get it".

There were people who had lost absolutely everything and they're paying celebrities to swan around and shake hands with them.
(Elizabeth)

~

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.
(Melissa)

~

[Because of the flood] our income was gone ... So for the next 30, 40 years I was on my own with six kids because he was away working ... that was the only work he could get ... He worked away fulltime until he was probably nearly 70. (Elizabeth)

~

It was a really, really, tough time and I didn't have the financial resources to get back on my feet for a very long time. So, you know, my son lived that. (Michelle)

~

One of the people there was saying, "Go on, take the windcheater, take the Roxy windcheater, here's a pretty one, take that". And she's saying, "No, no, no, I don't need it." And the lady's saying, "Take it, take it". And she said she picked it up and then she put it down at the entrance because she was too embarrassed to take it. But somebody had seen her take it and rang my son and said, "What's Sophie doing taking clothes from the Recovery Centre, she didn't lose anything". (Zoe)

~

Maybe they've lost possessions that we don't know about, maybe they've lost opportunities which change their circumstances. Everyone is in a state of high adrenalin and... our brains getting to a very efficient way for dealing with ... problems ... we become very quick to judge ... In a way, we move to a very simple black and white judgement way of thinking.
(Dr Rob Gordon, 2013)

I was rushing in to a dangerous situation and totally oblivious because it was all about the adrenaline and doing the right thing. (Murray)

~

I was the father figure and they had me to lean on, or felt I was their protector. So they didn't have the fear that I had ... I was at the apex and I was the one ... at the forefront. (Alex)

~

Talking to a lot of my friends, they all comment on how different their husbands are, and ... we're just getting on with our own lives now. (Louise)

~

I internalised that I could handle this that I was the head of the family and therefore I had to remain strong and I couldn't show any weakness. So all emotion went inside. (Mike)

~

I was not shouting – but inside I was. (Luke)

~

We won't send you out on jobs until we all think, including yourself, you're OK. (Nathan)

~

'You know, Seth, I thought you were more of a man than that'.

~

We can't call them [for debriefing] because if they identify us as struggling, we're stood down'. (Chloe)

~

If there's a perceived weakness, bang, go for it. Get rid of them. (Warren)

~

I've been changed by the disaster ... I had days I'd be sitting on the tractor and suddenly I'd burst into tears. On my own. Nobody there. I really wasn't too sure what that was all about. (Luke)

~

A man's role is to protect, build, protect. And when that was taken away from them, they were emasculated, and that was the biggest problem with them being able to deal with it. (Lena)

Gendered expectations

This long-term disaster resilience research confirms other research findings that gendered expectations of strong, masculine men and nurturing, protective women become more salient during and after the disaster. One informant, Kate, observed that 'the situation sat so far outside anyone's experience that people had no reference for behaviour - maybe that is why we see a return to the gender normative behaviour'.

Men

Men felt the pressure of responding to requests for help both within and outside their family. It felt like a test during the disaster, and after, it changed some men's personalities. Gendered expectations led men to denial, not talking about the disaster, having angry outbursts and not identifying when they needed help. In comparison, women often held families together and were responsible for the emotional health of the family – sometimes at great cost to their own autonomy, health and wellbeing. Their contributions were often invisible.

The notion that men 'protect' women and children, although disproved (Elinder & Erixson, 2012) and disappearing, retained its potency for some men. One saw his value as being his strong male body: 'Am I OK, am I a good enough person?' because my whole world has been built by my ability to do stuff with my body" (Seth).

Men wanted to embody masculinity as prescribed – protectors, strong, silent, and unaffected by the disaster. Anything less was perceived as failure by their own, and society's standards. Some spoke of dissonance between who they were and who they appeared to be. Ways to cope for men in society without losing face, included keeping busy (or away), withdrawing, not talking, or being angry. Status for men was threatened if they were seen crying or expressing emotion about their disaster experience. Penalties were either imposed by workplaces, or the fear of that was enough to prevent men expressing emotion this way or asking for psychological help.

Men's reluctance to seek help was affirmed in this research, and the direct link to workplace consequences offers the rationale. It appeared that organisations assumed men who asked for psychological help were less able to continue work than others. It appears to be assumed that men who did not seek psychological help were actually fit for work, rather than assuming that they were simply lacking the insight that they needed help, or fearful of the work penalties that would follow. Occupational health guidelines appear to over-ride such considerations. In relationships and the home, men also struggled to maintain the stoicism required. Their partners or adult children frequently stepped in to persuade and cajole men to seek help.

Successful strategies for engaging men seemed to be those fashioned around work. Working 'shoulder to shoulder' allowed a more natural conversation, particularly with people skilled in counselling. New theorising (Pease, in press) encourages men to identify their own

vulnerability. This re-imagining of masculinity offers a step forward in healthier human beings and a planet that is less endangered through men's attachment to invulnerability and being 'in control'.

Women

Reiterating the conclusions in our previous research (*The Way He Tells It*), women are expected to make sacrifices to look after traumatised partners, children and elderly parents. Women gave up paid employment to care for family members who were struggling after the fires, and to manage the paperwork and bureaucracy involved in re-establishing their lives, e.g. insurance claims, red tape, rebuilding and grants. The myth of women and children first was exposed again in this research, with girls in danger and this largely unrecognised. Also unacknowledged is the high rate of female deaths in bushfires through women's socially determined role as carer of children, driving them out from bushfire danger (Parkinson & Duncan, 2018). Lack of women's autonomy contributed to the danger, and inability to quickly persuade male partners or others to leave. This research reaffirmed that women are expected to cope with complications and urgency of driving out of danger zones with children, pets and neighbours.

Women experienced further discrimination in lower valuing of their contribution and lack of regard for the emotional support they offered to family, friends and communities.

Part 3: Disaster planning for self, family, children and community

Children in disaster areas

In the 50-years to 2008, the majority of child deaths in Australian disasters occurred as a result of parent's decisions, and late evacuation was the most common cause of death (Haynes, 2008). Young people in this research spoke of absolute faith in parents, yet the evidence of past disasters suggests such faith can be misplaced. Should parents have a right to risk the lives of children? There is a strong argument for attention to be paid to the rights of children in disasters. In this research, children's disaster experiences resulted in mental health issues and a changed life course for many. Twenty informants spoke about the presence of their children in disasters where they came close to losing their lives. Fifteen shared their own memories of what it was like being a child in a disaster.

Apart from fear of the disaster itself, a particular burden for children was watching parents argue about what to do, delaying action while in danger. Now young adults, informants spoke of still being haunted by nightmares of this. In this and our previous research, informants told of partners or ex-partners taking children *into* fire zones unnecessarily, evading roadblocks and subjecting even very young children to terrifying sights and situations. Some children were present when parents phoned 000 to tell them to look for bodies, or relatives to say goodbye. This kind of trauma is not forgotten, and it coloured relationships with mothers, fathers and siblings. Such intense disaster experiences had implications for the future lives – and resilience – of many young people.

I know this is stereotyping. Men are protectors kind of thing, it's what we get brought up to be ... The provider, the protector. So we go rushing out, brain's switched off, just go rushing out. Where women are more the nurturer, they're looking after the kids. (Murray)

~

Going through my catalogue of my observations of men and my observations of women, their roles are very, very different, post disaster. (Kate)

~

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. (Jillian)

~

I also had elderly parents that lived in town and they require a lot of support ... so much of it fell to me. (Alexia)

~

It appears watching my wife, is that women are really good at talking about their emotional lives. (Seth)

~

We're solving problems and you're just worrying about your girlfriend or whatever. (Andrew)

~

There's no way you could prepare anybody through training for what we see ... The magnitude of Black Saturday, Ash Wednesday & other disasters was such that people who were not involved could never fully appreciate the assault to women, men & children. (Murray)

~

My dad was adamant, he's like, 'If anything's happening, I'm staying'. So there was a bit of a fight between my parents on what decision was going to be made, staying or going. My mum didn't want anyone staying behind ... I dream about ... me trying to get them to go and they're like, 'No, no, let's just stay and have a coffee' ... That's a frequent dream that I have. (Samantha)

He'd been a bright and sunny kid and he became dark and morose ... Our neighbour ... said that our son was either talking about or acting out killing himself. (Bradley)

~

He went from a very sunny, open child to a child that was very sad a lot of the time and, in recent years, he developed very significant depression and has had some suicidal behaviour around choking himself and some self-harming behaviour around cutting and burning himself. (Kate)

~

In some cases, the children had to take over, and the children did ... There were ... children that were holding the house together. (Elise)

~

You have little rituals... within a family that you do with the kids and... a lot of these went out the window because I think you're just too busy trying to survive. (Suzanne)

~

Our eldest [would] be sitting in class and looking out the window and she'd just see the fire coming towards her ... It had negative long term impacts, definitely. (Suzanne)

~

She started to rebel. She turned. She was a really good student ... Then she started wagging school, didn't go to class, she started smoking, moved schools at least three times, didn't finish high school ... Completely thrown her off her ambitions. (Beccy)

~

My son ... had all these big plans and he finished VCE barely passing. He moved from home immediately, he never ever returned ... He now lives [overseas]. I don't think [this] would ever have happened if the fires hadn't happened. (Zoe)

~

Lucy struggled ... didn't want to be one of those 'bushfire kids'. (John)

~

One of my close friends ... She had no nothing, no uniform, books or anything ... Someone made a comment like, 'Where's your uniform? You smell like smoke, your house burnt down, haha'. (Beccy)

For many, the disaster experience was a defining moment in their lives. Anxiety, depression and trauma emerged for some. For several young people, the consequences were felt several years later, as they began their independent life.

Although this and other research finds family members do not like to be separated, in extreme circumstances where lives may be lost, surviving separately is preferable to dying together. In the days after a disaster too, it is important that children are not taken back in, as potential danger goes beyond emotional harm to contaminants in the air.

Children's experience of disaster and its aftermath was determined by their parents' decisions. Parents enacting a clear fire plan resulted in less risk and better outcomes for children.

In fire and flood situations, roadblocks are established to keep people out of danger, but these are not taken seriously. One after another informants, in this and our previous research, speak of knowingly evading roadblocks. Education and imposition of penalties are clearly required to ensure people comply. The corollary is that policing must consider local knowledge and conditions, so that people trust the decision-making of authorities. After the disaster event, a crucial change must be made to review regulations to allow family reunion when roadblocks are in place.

Parents' guilt

The worry people felt in relation to children's involvement in and after disasters was a barrier to their own recovery and resilience. In disasters' aftermath, informants spoke of children – either themselves or *their* children – becoming parentified, taking on adult responsibilities and trying to resolve conflict or soothe tensions. Childhood was truncated as children shared the heavier workload that resulted from the disaster and provided emotional support to the family. For some young people, the responsibilities were enormous, bridging both practical and emotional support of parents. In recalling this, parents felt regret remembering the burden their children carried.

Schools

It is important that schools develop comprehensive fire and flood plans, including post-disaster actions. Schools played an especially important role in determining children's post-disaster recovery, as being able to complete education is highly significant to long-term resilience. Some informants spoke of studies being affected even years after the disaster, and schooling derailed.

The success, or otherwise, of the schools' handling of the post-disaster period stayed with people well into adulthood. Where schools did well, the difference was explained by leadership and empathy, and sometimes shared experience by principals and teachers. In contrast, lack of understanding of disasters' impact was as apparent in 2009 as in 1983.

Bullying emerged as a strong theme. At a very basic level, there was room for closer attention to the needs of student survivors. Even in 2009, some students spoke of not having the uniform of the new

temporary school, and therefore being immediately identifiable as a fire-affected student. Some spoke of not having the books everyone else had. At a more complex human relations level, intervention was needed to educate unaffected students in consideration of others' feelings. It appeared that many students displayed an immaturity and insensitivity also noticed in adult workplaces (*Men on Black Saturday*), where fire-affected people were targeted out of curiosity or by bullies.

Family obligations can endanger lives

A significant and life-threatening issue is where family members are called upon in emergencies to either assist in driving relatives to safety, or to help protect relatives' property in bushfires. In doing so, they put their own lives at risk, and worse, the lives of children in their care. Long-term resilience is implicated both in terms of actually surviving, as well as avoiding life-time trauma. Brooke, only 11 years old on Black Saturday remembers the delay in escaping as her father and grandmother had to be convinced to leave. In this research, men were conscripted by other family members to go and help in dangerous situations.

It is disturbing to hear of much younger relatives attempting to persuade elders to leave, even to the extent of driving *into* bushfire threatened zones to personally take them out of danger (*Men on Black Saturday*).

An informant with a military background reflected that there is no way to prepare for certain tragic sights, and that involvement in disasters can injure people's mental health as well as threaten lives. Exposing family members to this potential for harm needs to be considered with awareness of the potential 'assault'.

Further, long-term disaster resilience may be compromised by feelings of resentment that others exposed them to a fire event. These feelings continue to negatively affect the health and wellbeing of informants to this research. Compulsory evacuations are rarely, if ever, used in Australia, and people can make an informed decision to stay (Eburn, 2014). This is a choice, but one that should be made without involving others.

Suicide by disaster

Informants to this research spoke of making this choice in a future disaster. Some who barely survived bushfires nevertheless plan to stay – in full recognition of the risk. These were older people who found the thought of having to start all over again too much. Other informants – both young and old – spoke explicitly of not wanting to survive a future fire like the one they survived, ostensibly choosing the risk of death over the pain of re-establishing. One informant did not want CFA members to take risks for his home and wanted the responsibility for his own decision in the fire and his own life. Having a lifetime's knowledge of bushfires and having barely survived fires in 1999, he is effectively choosing his destiny, not expecting others to help. As a single man not involving others in his decision, he feels this is his right.

Without a viable and enjoyable future, it can be a rational decision to choose suicide. With suicide legal, and individual choice a value in our society, a person's decision to stay in the face of imminent disaster threat must be respected. The caveat is that others must not be implicated.

In some cases, the children had to take over ... There were some children that were holding the house together. (Elise)

~

One day my son ... [came] in exhausted ... & said, 'Mum I can't keep doing this' ... He was living on no sleep ... Then my husband came in & said, 'I can't keep going ... & I haven't watered the sheep' & my son said, 'It's all right Dad, sit down, I'll go & do it'. For many, many months ... he'd get in from the farm at 4am ... after carting water, feeding all night then ... get up at 7am, go to school. (Alexia)

~

There's no way you could prepare anybody through training for what we see ... The magnitude of Black Saturday, Ash Wednesday & other disasters was such that people who were not involved could never fully appreciate the assault to women, men & children. (Murray)

~

We got Dad and our dog and Nan in the car. Nan was a bit hard as well. She got in the car, then she went back because she realised she left her purse ... or she didn't lock the door or something Just wasting time that we didn't have much of. (Brooke)

~

People are allowed to make their own decisions ... As long as they're not putting anyone else's lives at risk then that's their decision. (Nick)

~

I'm 75 now and I'm going to stay again if a fire comes ... They can hold a gun to my head. I'm not going ... If it's going to take me five years to recover and that'll make me 80 I'd rather go now. I don't want five years of recovery. (Luke)

~

'I'm not leaving the property,' I said, 'I will die before I go back through that again.' (Josie)

~

Her husband died about 30 years ago. Their place was ... razed ... She said 'I'm still not going. I will not be going next time ... [This place] has a lot of meaning to me'. (Warren)

You can't stop the flood but you can help people get better prepared and you can help people from falling back ... to again being lazy with information. (Ellen)

~

No one said anything that particular time because they were frightened people were going to panic. And that's the part that annoyed more people than anything else because most of us woke up to [the flood], stepping out of your bed and there was water.

(Scott)

~

But where do you go? That's the controversial point, because they don't tell you where to go. They just don't want you to be there.

(Jonathan)

~

As part of the CFA I could see the potential danger some people were in. The fires in some parts were impossible to control until rain came and it wouldn't take much for those people to be wiped out.

(Alexia)

~

You've got to have a fire plan but a fire plan's actually a complex thing.

(Bradley)

~

Women are more likely to think 'I'm going to be leaving here early' and sometimes when you're down at the table they'll both simultaneously say, she'll say 'I'm leaving early' and he'll say, 'I'm going to stay and defend' and they'll sort of look at each other like that and I say, 'You need to sort that out now because you don't want a screaming match in the car with the flames coming over the hill'. (Ruth)

~

[Over the years, the] logistics all change, that scenario is different. My desire to stay is that I can't be bothered rebuilding, and Emma said, 'Well that's ridiculous'. I go, 'Well no, we worked so hard to build this place the way we wanted it'. (John)

Disaster plans

The locations where many people live in Victoria and across Australia can be dangerous. Some areas even lie within a known 'footprint' for fires, or in floodplains. Experience of life-threatening fire or flood, when combined with ongoing high risk (sometimes in the absence of other options), compromises resilience.

Planning for disasters – whether fire or flood – is complex. However, it is an important component of resilience and one that relies on accurate and reliable information about impending disaster. In the period shortly after the disaster, information is needed on how to access help to defend oneself, or one's family, property or community.

Even 50 or more years after a life-threatening fire experience, the threat inherent in a hot windy day sparks anxiety and fear in women and men. Disaster resilience is predicated firstly on believing a future disaster experience is manageable or avoidable. Having a measure of control appears vital to resilience. In theory, fire plans offer a degree of control, yet only 5% of people have a written fire plan (McLennan, 2015) and this figure is not increased by a previous experience of bushfire.

Amongst our sample, many spoke of their uncertainty despite – or possibly because of – their knowledge and awareness of what is at stake. For many, the complexity *prevented* having an agreed, written and practised fire plan.

The policy of the Victorian Government is 'Leave and Live', adopted after the devastating 2009 Black Saturday bushfires. The new policy more clearly prioritises lives over property. Having written, practised and agreed fire plans will save lives.

Involvement of gender in fire planning

Underlying the practical considerations is a largely unacknowledged barrier to having agreed, written and practised fire plans. Conflict within heterosexual couples, based on gendered roles, complicates and prevents fire planning. Gendered expectations – of the man as the 'protector' by defending the family home and woman as the 'carer', driving children out to safety – are even more stringent in times of disaster (Parkinson & Duncan, 2018).

Most fire and flood planning is at a practical level and would benefit from families, neighbourhoods and communities going deeper to explicate the motivations of people in what they plan to do. In particular, the central role of gender in both fire and flood experience should be explicitly recognised and addressed. Gendered roles and expectations are so ingrained that 'choices' – of staying to defend property by men and leaving to protect children by women – can remain unnamed and unexamined. With female death rates of 40% in the 50 years to 2008 (Haynes, 2010) and 42% on Black Saturday in 2009, this problem must be named in order to be addressed. For example, women's autonomy to leave early, especially *with* male partners, is compromised. Whether these assigned gender roles are logical in the 21st century needs to be examined.

No getting over it

In the aftermath, survivors are judged by those closest to them – or by their work colleagues, or by organisations providing grants, or by insurance companies – as to how deserving they are of empathy or practical assistance. Even those within the emergency management sector seem ready to put disaster losses down to people's unwillingness to respond to their disaster warnings and advice. Why don't they have a written fire plan? Why don't they leave early? Sadly, these judgements limit recovery and hinder resilience.

The experience of Black Saturday and Ash Wednesday for a great many people, was that there was no fighting that fire, and no getting over it. This new knowledge of the unpredictable nature of fires elevates the critical need for written and practised fire plans. The same learning, that there is no getting over it, was true for flood survivors, whose planning for future floods involved fear of being unable to cope with both the flood and the clean-up afterwards.

Conclusion

This research drew on the experiences and insight of 56 disaster survivors to understand resilience, what it is, what contributes to it over time, and its limits. Informants reflected on the disasters and their lives since. For the 28 who recalled Black Saturday, almost 10 years had passed. For others it was longer – more than half a century for some. Each survivor had a unique lens through which they reflected on their experience. However, the individuals' relationships with our social institutions, and their trust in institutions in times of disaster recovery and reconstruction, emerged as a central theme and critical to ongoing emergency management and practice.

The timeframe in our earlier research asked women and men to speak about recent events, recent in that they had occurred no more than three years prior. There was immediacy in their words. Raw emotion fuelled their narratives as they spoke of the immense pressures they were mostly still living through. Challenges to their equilibrium were everywhere in the early post-disaster years. People spoke of drug and alcohol use, PTSD diagnoses and medication almost community-wide, conflict verging on violence in community meetings, hyper-masculinity, relationships now troubled or separated, and increased or new violence against women and children. Further stressors were described in perceptions of unfairness and dealings with bureaucracy. In the midst of the turmoil, the post-disaster period sat alongside the disaster itself in terms of intensity.

In this long-term disaster research, the rawness and intensity remained when informants spoke of the days of the disaster, and the disruptive effects on their sense of self, their close relationships and their trust in institutions which traditionally form the cornerstones of our society. Equally, informants in this long-term disaster resilience research remembered the ongoing assault in the aftermath, as these relationships unravelled or had to be redefined. Informants described the ongoing assault as continuing to unfold disruptively over long periods, through ten and sometimes 25 years.

I don't know that you ever forget. And it has to have a major impact on you ... I don't think there's any recovery. (Alex - 2009)

~

Some of our friends and their little babies got killed in the fire ... Those little babies that I was holding in my arms the week before the fire are gone. So that has a big impact. That doesn't go away. (Seth - 2009)

~

I don't think you ever recover as in as if it never happened ... recovery is never over ... because you always really feel for the next incident. (Melissa - 1983)

~

One day I'm really poorly and the next day I'm fantastic. I think there's increments all the way along ... I'm reasonably good now but for a long time I could not bear to be in a forest. I remember driving ... through that beautiful tall forest and I was just creeped out, almost heart palpitations, almost a panic attack. (Suzanne - 1983)

~

I don't know if things have ever been totally OK again. Well I've never stopped thinking about it. (Elizabeth – 1974 flood)

~

If there's something that's to be set up for the community, it needs to involve the community. (Nathan)

~

Good process and good systems about community consultation? They weren't adhered to because of the sense of urgency. (Seth)

~

The dominant feeling is that [community consultation] was all bullshit and the large post-it notes that were stuck around the room did nothing ... there's nothing that we asked for ever really made it in any sort of meaningful way... 'You were asked what you wanted, we just chose to ignore you'. (Kate)

~

I'm more than suspicious. I mean [community consultation] was cosmetic, unquestionably cosmetic. (Eric)

Whatever happened to that warehouse full of butchers' paper and stick-it notes? Because there must be one by now, we've had that much consultation. Where did it all go? What happened to it? Because nothing's happened. (Elise)

~

The first ... two years after an event is not the time to be trying to plan what a community should be ... Preparation is not just having your own fire plan, communities need to be prepared as well ... We were able to just swing into action after the fire, we had done the community consultation in the easier times rather than post disaster. (Ruth)

In contrast to this unravelling, the use of collaborative community preparation for disaster has proven to work in at least one community, as expounded by an informant to this research (Ruth, Appendix 6). Trust was built by authentic consultation in a variety of ways and involving significant numbers of the community. In this way, community plans were developed before the disaster, allowing its implementation in the aftermath when community members were overwhelmed with recovery and reconstruction efforts. This model would exist in various forms in other communities and could be widely adopted and adapted. The impact on individuals' relationships with institutions in disaster response recovery and reconstruction, characterised here as institutional trust, is central to these findings and consequently a key insight for emergency management policy and practice.

Sociologically, a deeper approach to understanding disaster resilience could see explicit recognition of the negative impact of gendered expectations. Discussion in disaster planning from the kitchen table to COAG (Council of Australian Governments) would ideally consider the following:

- Challenge the assumed gendered expectations of men protecting the home and women protecting children. Identify these as outdated notions that put people's lives at risk.
- Men must not be expected to exhibit invulnerability in all circumstances, nor inhabit prescribed masculinity – as historically and romantically defined.
- Women's rights to autonomy, employment and freedom from violence – even after disasters - must be unconditional.

As guilt and resentment both inhibit resilience, two Australia-wide discussions are needed: (1) on the imperative for those choosing to stay in disaster zones to do so only without implicating others, and (2) on safeguarding children in disasters – given the high rates of child deaths in bushfires and in light of Australia's support of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Two opposing notions emerged strongly through the informants' words – 'Aren't you over it yet?' and 'There's no getting over it'. The intensity of a disaster experience can re-emerge unexpectedly or in combination with other traumas, thereby compromising resilience. If Australians understand the damage we do in expecting people to 'get over' disasters, and stop asking this question, people's sense of being resilient will be enhanced. This education could begin with community and political leaders and the media. In the initial coverage of disasters, catch-cries of 'Australian spirit' and 'community pulling together' could be replaced with more realistic and accurate statements, recognising the losses borne by survivors and the difficult times ahead. This calls for wider support and empathy. Critically, school children must be educated to eliminate bullying of disaster-affected students.

This research indicates that increasing long-term disaster resilience is a task for all Australians and our leaders, not just for survivors. Many recommendations emerged from this research, and provide workable starting points for what appears to be broad-scale social change.

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 kindness.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations seek to prevent long-term negative consequences from disaster and promote resilience. We present them in good faith to be tested in each stage of disasters from prevention, planning, response, recovery and reconstruction, through to the long-term for disaster survivors. It was clear from the interviews that both the way the disaster planning was conducted and the way the immediate aftermath was handled had a direct connection to resilience over the long-term. As a result, recommendations cover relevant aspects of disaster planning, recovery and reconstruction, as well as suggestions for the longer-term. They emerge from the insights and knowledge of informants to this research. In addition, some recommendations reiterate those from our earlier reports. These are noted with the relevant reference.

1. Improve and extend disaster plans

1.1 Educate fire authorities and others who assist with fire planning to:

(To be actioned by State and Federal emergency management authorities)

- 1.1.1 Recognise and discuss the power disparity within heterosexual³ couples that make fire planning conflictual. Name the traditional gender roles that continue to influence the division of responsibilities within the relationship.
- 1.1.2 Portray men as being equally responsible for children in messaging directed toward the public.
- 1.1.3 Encourage women in family violence situations to have a disaster plan – refer to 1800 RESPECT.⁴
- 1.1.4 Prioritise all adults leaving with children.
- 1.1.5 Encourage expression of vulnerability in men, in recognition of its intrinsic part of being human, particularly in the face of disasters and their aftermath. Educate both community and the emergency management sector on the harm emerging from men's sense of invulnerability – to themselves, to women and children, and to the health of the planet.⁵
- 1.1.6 Refer to the Gender and Emergency Management (GEM) Guidelines and checklist, which offer additional actions to break-down outdated gendered expectations and save lives.⁶
- 1.1.7 Undertake training to underpin use of the GEM Guidelines in recognition of the need to understand gendered risks and issues, e.g GAD Pod Training. See Recommendation 12.

1.2 When assisting individual families to write a fire plan

(To be actioned by State and Federal emergency management authorities and community level disaster planners)

- 1.2.1 Include specific questions about elderly or other relatives where there is a level of responsibility, and identify what actions will be taken to assist them in a disaster – and importantly discuss with them what actions will not be taken if they choose not to

³ Heterosexual couples are identified distinct from same-sex or other diverse couples as differing opinions have been identified within these couples based on identification with CIS gender roles, leading to conflict when planning for bushfires.

⁴ See *Disaster is no excuse for family violence* postcard www.genderanddisaster.com.au/info-hub/research-resources

⁵ See Pease, B. (in press).

⁶ <https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/national-gender-and-emergency-management-guidelines/>

leave when disaster threatens. (In other words, when individuals decide to risk their lives in disasters, they should not implicate others, and this discussion should be explicitly part of disaster planning.)

1.2.2 Include specific questions about what will be done when or if the family is separated, either temporarily or otherwise, ideally agreeing that family members who are in safe zones should stay there rather than attempting to join family in disaster-affected areas.

1.3 Consider adapting good models of practice for community-wide disaster preparedness and post-disaster recovery, and cross reference with GEM Guidelines. (See examples in Appendix 6 from informants, and Diversity in Disaster Outcomes Statement.)⁷
(To be actioned by community-level disaster planning.)

1.4 Ensure good support for community leaders in times of disaster.
(To be actioned by community-level disaster planning.)

2. Reinstate essential services for individuals after disasters ASAP

2.1 Use government-funded services (or the Army) to reinstate water, power, communications and access to food after disasters for individual community members and property holders.
(To be actioned by State and Federal emergency management authorities.)

2.2 Provide school uniforms, books, stationary, and any other school necessities to students impacted by the disaster. If this is not immediately possible, institute casual clothes days in the interim for all children so as not to identify and expose children affected by the disaster.
(To be actioned by schools.)

3. Review access to pets and livestock⁸

3.1 Review access restrictions to properties by land owners with livestock after disasters
(To be actioned by Police.)

3.1.1 Escort or enable owners of potentially injured livestock to take the livestock for veterinarian treatment, or to allow vets in to destroy injured stock and manage the potential outbreak of animal disease.

3.2 Caring for pets and livestock:
(To be actioned by community-level disaster planning.)

3.2.1 Develop options for care of pets in disaster contexts.

3.2.2 Extend free veterinary care post-disaster to ensure access by those who need it.

4. Educate Australians through ongoing Community Service Announcements (CSAs)

(To be actioned by State and Federal emergency management authorities)

4.1 Increase public awareness of the serious impacts of natural disasters on mental health, which may affect people at any time in their life. (From *Men on Black Saturday*)

4.2 Fund Community Service Announcements to re-educate Australians in ways similar to those of campaigns relating to road safety and smoking on:
(To be actioned by State and Federal emergency management authorities)

⁷ Bailey, 2018. See also: *Safer Together - Community First* <https://www.safertogether.vic.gov.au/community-first>

⁸ See Vol.2 for supporting documentation

- 4.2.1 The danger of driving into disaster zones, such as areas that are announced to be under threat of fire, flood or other disasters.
- 4.2.2 The penalties for failing to comply with police roadblocks in disaster zones.
- 4.2.3 Not risking children's lives by taking them in to disaster zones.
- 4.2.4 Not planning to use children to help protect property where disasters warnings are severe.
- 4.2.5 Where children are unavoidably caught in disaster situations, give age-appropriate opportunities to contribute to life-saving efforts, without placing their lives at additional risk.⁹
- 4.2.6 The long-term impact of disaster experience and PTSD and the insensitivity of asking 'Aren't you over it yet?'
- 4.2.7 The damage of bullying and lack of understanding at schools in the aftermath of disaster.
- 4.2.8 Establish a Disaster Awareness Day (like RUOK?).
- 4.2.9 The likely increase in domestic violence in disasters.¹⁰

5. Review media reporting from disaster-affected communities to more accurately portray men and women (as below) and to reduce the impact on disaster-affected communities
(To be actioned by politicians, spokespeople, the media and producers of written resources about disasters)

- 5.1 Reduce reference to, and coverage of, 'heroes', 'Australian spirit', 'communities pulling together' and include acknowledgement of great losses to people and reference to a long recovery requiring the moral support of all Australians.
- 5.2 Reduce stereotypical portrayals of men and women in disasters.
- 5.3 Equally reward preventative actions and women's role in bushfires (alongside men's role).
- 5.4 Educate the Australian public on the short- and long-term effects of disasters on survivors through sensitive and accurate reporting.

6. Review and extend training and mentoring opportunities for community leaders
(To be actioned by Government and post-disaster authorities)

- 6.1 Offer both formal and informal leadership training opportunities to women and men in rural and urban areas with a known disaster risk, so that they can play a leadership role in community education.
- 6.2 Establish opportunities for emergency service (and other) leaders in the community to be mentored by people with prior disaster leadership experience.
- 6.3 Offer programs to build the skill-set of community development practitioners in relation to the impact of disasters on communities, recognising the disruption to communities by both the event itself, and the aftermath.

7. Ensure disaster-affected employees have access to (and are aware of how to access) confidential support
(To be actioned by emergency service organisations and other workplaces)

⁹ See the work of Lisa Gibbs: https://beyondbushfires.org.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/2196790/V2_Beyond-Bushfires-Final-Report-2016.pdf

¹⁰ See CSA by GAD Pod & 1800 Respect on *Family violence and disaster* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K1wiG1VeEW8>

- 7.1 Provide and promote the use of Employee Assistance Program (EAP) where totally confidential support is ensured, so there are no negative career implications for seeking help (such as removing from active duty).
- 7.2 Examine approaches in curbing the careers of employees who seek help, while assuming those not seeking help are capable.¹¹

8. Address community-wide trauma after disasters

(To be actioned by post-disaster recovery authorities)

- 8.1 Ensure that employed post-disaster workers, e.g. case managers, are trained in community engagement and skilled in post-disaster issues (such as domestic violence and gendered dynamics) for at least four years post-disaster.
- 8.2 Employ people with a lived experience of disaster recovery where possible, to provide empathy, hope and insight into the recovery process.
- 8.3 Establish a peer-support network so that community members can be supported to help each other in interventions for suicide, mental ill-health, abuse of drugs and alcohol, and domestic violence.
- 8.4 Provide professional support to prevent burn-out of post-disaster workers.
- 8.5 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. (From *Men on Black Saturday*)
- 8.6 Promote the publically funded 'Better Access' initiative, which allows people with mental health difficulties to access a Mental Health Care Plan from their GP. This is a referral to a psychologist or other allied mental health practitioner for either individual or group therapy with Medicare rebates for up to 10 sessions per year. Psychologists specialising in trauma can be found through the Australia Psychological Society (APS) website at <https://www.psychology.org.au/Find-a-Psychologist>.¹²
- 8.7 Fund psychological and community support for disaster survivors in the long-term, in recognition that trauma may emerge at any time over the lifespan.
- 8.8 Routinely provide counselling assistance for women, men and children who present as witnesses in subsequent legal proceedings (such as class actions) or public inquiries (such as Royal Commissions).
- 8.9 Subsidise a range of health and wellbeing activities for women, men and children in community settings.
- 8.10 Where possible, use the skills and expertise of local people in health and wellbeing activities for the community, and in reconstruction and post-disaster employment.
- 8.11 Consult in good faith with community members to build trust.
(To be actioned by government authorities).
- 8.12 Offer administrative assistance and other resources needed to community groups post-disaster.
(To be actioned by government authorities).
- 8.13 Provide advocates for disaster survivors to assist in negotiating and planning during the rebuilding process. (Or ideally, allocate a consultant to inspect the disaster-

¹¹ See also, Recommendation 1.1.5

¹² See also, Recommendation 1.1.5

affected property and project manage the rebuild, including arranging payment for contractors, and final inspection, in collaboration with the property owner).

9. Educate children on how disaster experiences can affect survivors and the importance of sensitivity towards them in the aftermath

(To be actioned by State Government)

9.1 Introduce to disaster-affected schools – and sustain over the long-term – programs such as Respectful Relationships and adapt such programs to address bullying post-disaster.

9.2 Include education on how to deal with perceived ‘unfairness’, referring to Rob Gordon’s approach.¹³

10. Review grant processes and planning and building regulations

(To be actioned by Federal, State and local emergency management):

10.1 Ensure policy regarding grants post-disaster has equity as a central principle.

10.2 Educate and genuinely consult the community (e.g. by using learning networks)¹⁴ regarding

10.2.1 The complexity of ensuring fairness in relation to post-disaster funding and resource distribution.

10.2.2 The costs in rebuilding in high risk areas after disasters and the need to enforce risk-averse housing and planning regulations.

10.3 Authentically review identified issues at a local level with residents of high-risk areas, including policing of roadblocks in and after disasters.

10.4 Ensure consistency in the enforcement of building regulations following disaster (to be actioned by local government).

10.5 Employ grant administrators to assist local people in meeting probity and acquittals without imposing their own directives of how the funds are to be spent.

11. Promote awareness of increased domestic and family violence in disaster and improve response from emergency services, support services and the community.

(To be actioned by State and Federal government and emergency management authorities)

11.1 Prioritise attention to domestic and family violence in the aftermath of disasters with strategies to prevent and respond to it (to be actioned by disaster prevention agencies). (From *The Way He Tells It*)

11.2 Provide ‘Identifying family violence in disaster’ training to case managers (or other practitioners employed post-disaster) and require those providing support services to understand the dynamics of domestic and family violence.

11.3 Establish and promote a National Preferred Provider Register of disaster trauma practitioners who have a sound understanding of family violence. (From *The Way He Tells It*)¹⁵

12. Adopt the National Gender and Emergency Management Guidelines and implement Gendered Violence and Lessons In Disaster training.

(To be actioned by State and Federal government and emergency management authorities)

¹³ See page.10 for Dr Rob Gordon’s approach

¹⁴ *Safer Together - Community First* <https://www.safertogether.vic.gov.au/community-first>

¹⁵ See also, Recommendation 1.1.5

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