

Social ties matter beyond bushfires

October 30 2014, by Anne Rahilly



Life after bushfires. Credit: csironewsblog.com

In the first major release of findings from the Beyond Bushfires study of the aftermath of the Black Saturday bushfires, researchers from the University of Melbourne have been able to show the social element of disasters.

Speaking at a Beyond Bushfires research symposium, a lead researcher Associate Professor Lisa Gibbs reported that social ties matter.

"Separation from close loved ones, during and immediately after the fires, was a risk factor for [mental health](#) problems for people who tend to feel anxious about their relationships," Associate Professor Gibbs said.

"Family members often had different responses to their bushfire experience and we also see gender differences in relation to risk and protective factors," she said.

"Having more close emotional ties is generally related to better mental health and personal wellbeing after a disaster. Involvement in local community groups and organisations is also associated with more positive outcomes."

People with poorer mental health often have [social ties](#) with one another. Also, people with larger social networks were more likely to have a personal connection to someone who died in the [bushfires](#).

People who were the most affected by the bushfires were more likely to move to a new community, with mixed experiences. For those who stayed in their community, there was generally a stronger sense of community connection. For those who moved to a different community, the impact of subsequent financial and relationship difficulties was often lessened.

"Beyond Bushfires" is a five-year study led by the University of Melbourne in partnership with a range of providers including community, government, emergency, and service agencies.

The study explores the medium to long-term impacts of the Victorian 2009 bushfires on individuals and communities. The communities selected for this study had a range of bushfire experiences from low impact to high impact.

The study looks at impacts on residents such as mental health, wellbeing and social relationships, within selected communities. There were just over 1,000 participants who completed surveys in 2012 and were followed up in 2014.

It is anticipated that the findings of the Beyond Bushfires: Community, Resilience and Recovery study will help shape future policy and service delivery.

Provided by University of Melbourne

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