

Resilience in the face of disaster: New reports examine mental health and bushfires

February 16 2023, by Lilly Matson



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

A long-term study led by UNSW Sydney researchers has analyzed older Canberrans' mental health during the 2019/2020 bushfires.

Two new reports commissioned by the ACT Government, published as part of the [Personality and Total Health Through Life Project \(PATH\)](#),

have found older Canberrans were emotionally resilient following the bushfires in 2019 and 2020.

Professor Kaarin Anstey from UNSW's School of Psychology and NeuRA has led the PATH project, which is co-hosted by Australian National University (ANU) and UNSW, since 2006. PATH is a large, ongoing longitudinal study comprising approximately 7,500 participants from the ACT and neighboring city, Queanbeyan. The project provides invaluable information on [mental health](#) and cognitive function through adulthood.

[The latest reports](#) from PATH examined the mental [health](#) and well-being of more than 1,000 people aged between 59–87 from Canberra and the surrounding regions including the NSW South Coast, during the 2019/2020 bushfire season.

The studies found that while people reported their mental health worsening during the bushfire period, their mental health and well-being quickly returned to pre-disaster levels once the bushfires were over. Even those who did experience poorer mental health outcomes during the bushfires, such as people directly exposed to the fires, still scored on the lower range of mental distress.

"The reports show the significant impact that [natural disasters](#) such as bushfires have on the mental health of our community, but also that most people were resilient and bounced back during the recovery period. We also found that feeling prepared for natural disasters was associated with better mental health outcomes," says Prof. Anstey.

"These findings are likely relevant to all Australians experiencing bushfires and reinforce the value of investing in preparing the community for such events."

Capturing the impact of bushfires

Natural disasters such as bushfires have an impact on both physical and mental health and the 2019/2020 bushfire season in Australia was one of the most severe in recorded history.

Prof. Anstey's team was in the field surveying participants in late 2019 and early 2020 for the PATH Through Life Project when the bushfires hit.

"We recognized the significance of the fires and quickly put together a sub project to evaluate how the fires were affecting our study participants," says Prof. Anstey. "We administered an [online survey](#) to our study participants to capture their experiences."

The study revealed that women were more likely to experience negative mental health outcomes as a result of the bushfires but that for all participants, the encounter led to an appreciation of what and who they have in their lives, as well as those who helped them and others in need.

"The long-term involvement of our participants means we will be able to evaluate how this event impacts over all trajectories of well-being and mental health, and look at risk and protective factors for resilience," says Prof. Anstey.

ACT Minister for Mental Health Emma Davidson said the study highlighted the importance of Canberrans looking after their well-being during stressful events.

"With the recent 20th anniversary of the 2003 bushfires, it is fitting we reflect on the mental health challenges associated with natural disasters such as bushfires," Minister Davidson said.

"While it is encouraging to see the positive results in this report for older Canberrans, I cannot overstate how living through a natural disaster, even when you're not directly affected by it, can have a severe impact on your physical and mental health. "

The importance of longitudinal studies

The PATH project is one of the only longitudinal adult lifespan studies in Australia and provides unique data for researchers across multiple fields. To date, there have been over 300 papers, reports and theses published using PATH data.

The first wave of data collection occurred in 1999 and included adults aged 20–64 who were randomly sampled from the electoral roll of the ACT and Queanbeyan. Additional waves of data collection have occurred approximately every four years.

Studies published as part of the PATH project include research that ranges from understanding the impact of the Mediterranean diet on cognitive health, identifying [risk factors](#) for dementia, to analyses of the screening measures of affective and generalized anxiety disorders.

This latest report has provided essential insight into people's experiences with bushfires.

As the risk of [bushfires](#) is set to increase in the future due to Australia's changing climate, Prof. Anstey hopes that these results can help service providers to anticipate community needs and inform policy and program responses in future [bushfire](#) events.

Provided by University of New South Wales

Citation: Resilience in the face of disaster: New reports examine mental health and bushfires (2023, February 16) retrieved 10 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-02-resilience-disaster-mental-health-bushfires.html>

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