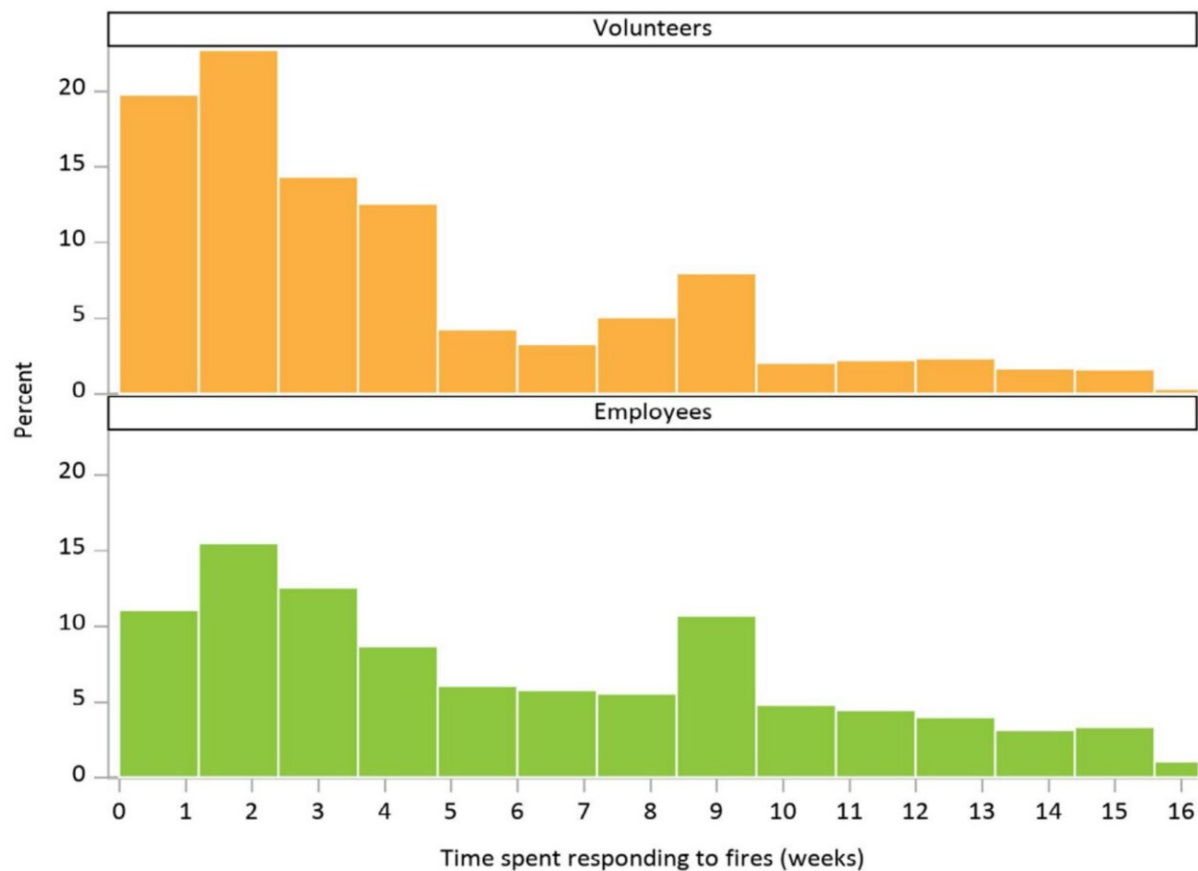


Report reveals urgent mental health needs after Australia's Black Summer Bushfires

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Credit: Time spent responding to bushfires among personnel who played an active role in responding to the 2019-20 bushfires. Credit: "After the Fires" final report (2023).

[The final Curtin University-led After the Fires report](#) has highlighted the mental health struggles of first responders in the aftermath of the devastating Black Summer Bushfires. The study found that reducing stigma associated with accessing mental health services, creating opportunities for time out and scaling up support services are key.

Unprecedented in magnitude, duration and intensity the Black Summer Bushfires of 2019-2020 in Australia's south-east resulted in widespread destruction, claiming 33 lives, destroying more than 3,000 homes and devastating wildlife and land across 20 million hectares.

More than two years on, the [mental health](#) and well-being of first responders from fire and rescue, rural fire and state emergency service (SES) agencies continue to be impacted. 78 percent of these responders were volunteers, most of whom were over the age of 45.

After the Fires lead author Professor David Lawrence from Curtin's School of Population Health said the findings are particularly important given that volunteers are likely to continue to play a significant role in responding to major bushfires in the foreseeable future.

"The largely volunteer workforce is the most valuable resource Australia has for disaster response. Our report shows the major challenge for our future bushfire preparedness is sustaining a volunteer cohort to respond to large-scale events without the risk of burnout or mental ill-health," Professor Lawrence said.

"Our study revealed a substantial percentage of personnel (31 percent of volunteers and 25 percent of employees) felt their lives were at risk during the fires, leading to significantly higher rates of probable serious mental illness and suicidality.

"Two years after the fires, rates of probable post-traumatic stress

disorder (PTSD) and psychological distress remained high among both volunteers (4.2 percent) and employees (7.3 percent). However, many individuals in high need of mental health support did not receive adequate help, often due to stigma or lack of awareness.

"Alarming, two years after the bushfires, emergency services personnel were twice as likely as members of the general population to have seriously considered ending their own life, at 5.6 percent of volunteers and 4 percent of employees. Only around one in five of these personnel with high need for mental health support felt they received as much help as they needed and only 16 percent of those who received professional help felt satisfied with the service provided.

"Cumulative exposure to traumatic events was identified as a significant risk factor for [mental health problems](#) in the emergency services sector. While the main protective factor for well-being was high levels of social support."

The After the Fires report makes three key recommendations:

- A multifaceted approach to [early intervention](#) and prevention including training on early warning signs, peer support, regular check ins, access to professionals with an understanding of the firefighter culture, educational workshops and family involvement. Developing initiatives to reduce stigma associated with accessing mental health support and encouraging openness to discussing emotional concerns among emergency services personnel.
- Creating opportunities for time out by putting in place strategies to ensure firefighters have access to scheduled breaks and support systems to help prevent burnout. Encouraging a workplace culture that recognizes the importance of self-care and taking breaks.

- Scaling up [support services](#) by expanding mental health support services, especially for volunteer firefighters, to ensure capacity meets the needs of personnel following major disasters.

"Mental health disorders are often hidden and may develop slowly which can belie the huge cost they have at a personal, community and national level. It is crucial that planning and provision of mental health resources proceeds quickly. After the Fires provides agencies and governments with information to focus the investment for the next phase of mental health reform across the sector to achieve the most positive outcomes," Professor Lawrence said.

After the Fires is a national survey of the well-being and resilience of Australia's [emergency services](#) personnel conducted in two waves studying the responders both one year and two years after the fires. More than 4,000 personnel, including 1,000 volunteers, from fire and rescue, rural fire and SES agencies across Australia participated in the After the Fires Wave 1 survey. After the Fires Wave 2 was conducted 12 months after Wave 1, and two years after the Black Summer bushfires. The After the Fires [final report](#) encompasses both waves.

More information: "After the Fires" final report: [s37430.pcdn.co/wp-content/uplo ... ort-Final-Report.pdf](https://s37430.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/After-the-Fires-Final-Report.pdf)

Provided by Curtin University

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