



Issue 12, November 2020

Mental Health impacts of Black Summer

[Summary of sections from chapter 4 'Human Health Impacts of the Fires', Parliamentary Inquiry into the Lessons to be learned in relation to the Australian bushfire season 2019-20, Interim Report, October 2020](#)

Mental Health

4.32 The bushfires had mental health impacts in addition to physical impacts and experiences of trauma can have long-lasting mental health consequences.

4.33 Most disaster survivors will 'recover without professional intervention within a number of months' but for some, psychological trauma experienced during bushfires can be long lasting and or emerge or re-emerge 'throughout any time in an affected individual's life'.³⁵

4.34 Mental health impacts of bushfires can have long-term ramifications and the full mental health impacts of the 2019–20 bushfire season would not be understood for some time.

Mental health and first responders

4.41 Mental health is a significant issue for firefighters and other first responders. Beyond the immediate mental health impacts for first responders and emergency workers in responding to bushfire events, they may also be personally impacted by losses incurred during bushfires.

4.42 Need to adequately prepare for the health impacts on first responders, such as firefighters and frontline volunteers, especially given the prolonged and intense response required by these groups during the 2019–20 bushfire season.

4.43 Many firefighters lost homes, stock and property. *“There is heavy reliance on volunteer firefighters who work for some months, losing time at work and time with their families, and at least one study has highlighted significant mental health impacts. With longer and more intense fire seasons expected that situation may not be tenable in the future.”*⁴⁵

4.44 The United Firefighters Union of Australia submitted research, from 2013 and 2017, regarding the mental health of firefighters, which found that:

- 68 per cent of Victorian (Country Fire Authority and Metropolitan Fire Brigade) career firefighters had indicated a moderate level of post-traumatic stress symptoms (a number which was likely to increase given the nature of the work)
- The most stressful incidents were the death or serious injury of a co-worker, a fire with multiple deaths, sudden infant death, a seriously injured child, death of a patient after a lengthy attempted resuscitation, assisting a seriously injured friend or relative and multi-casualty events



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- Approximately 50 per cent of South Australian Metropolitan Fire Service (SAMFS) career firefighters met the criteria of a mental health disorder in their lifetime, with the most common 12-month disorders being post-traumatic stress injury (PTSI), panic attacks and depressive episodes
- The risk of PTSI was significantly elevated among SAMFS who reported experiencing traumas they would commonly be exposed to during the course of their duty, including dealing with a deceased person and mass casualties.⁴⁶

4.45 In 2019 the Senate Education and Employment References Committee (E&E Committee) reported significant levels of a range mental health issues present amongst firefighters. These issues included anxiety, alcohol disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder and forms of psychological distress.⁴⁷

4.46 The E&E Committee noted that mental health issues can be the result of a singular incident that impacts the first responder, or as the result of 'the cumulative effect of repeat exposure to confronting situations'.⁴⁸ The committee made 14 recommendations about the mental health of first responders, the majority of which were supported by the government.⁴⁹

4.47 Further, the NSW inquiry into the 2019–20 bushfire season examined the mental health of firefighters and first responders. The inquiry considered 'mental health support to be an essential component of ensuring first responder safety'.⁵⁰ The NSW inquiry made a number of recommendations, including that:

- the NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) expand in-house mental health support for members, to ensure members can access the support they need (Recommendation 41); and
- the NSW Government work with the Commonwealth Government to provide a free mental health screen to firefighters post-fire event, and waive any gap payments if additional treatment is required, while creating a new Medicare Benefits Scheme item number in order to track demand for mental health services from firefighters over time (Recommendation 42).⁵¹

Mental health support

4.88 The committee congratulates the government for its prompt provision of funding to mental health support services, particularly for firefighters and emergency personnel. As noted in Chapter 2, funding has been spent on various mental health initiatives, and this will continue into 2020–21.

Better Access Bushfire Recovery initiatives

4.90 The committee supports the implementation of the Better Access Bushfire Recovery initiative, and the Better Access Bushfire Recovery Telehealth initiative.



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4.91 Telehealth, despite its noted limitations linked to inadequate communications infrastructure, has been shown to have broad support, particularly if telehealth services are provided in conjunction with face-to-face primary care (where possible).

4.92 However, the committee is concerned that these initiatives will cease as of 31 December 2021—right in the middle of another bushfire season.

4.93 The committee therefore *recommends that the Better Access Bushfire Recovery initiative and the Better Access Bushfire Recovery Telehealth initiative be made permanent, and continue to be included on the MBS.* [Recommendation 7](#)

4.94 This will provide first responders, emergency management employees, volunteers as well as affected individuals and families with access to timely and appropriate mental health support, and some peace of mind that this support will be there for the long-term. The initiatives should receive adequate and long-term funding over the next forward estimates.