



November 2021

Lawrence D, Ridders W, Houghton S, Hunt A, Bartlett J, Lawn S, Van Hooff M (2021) [*After the Fires: The impacts of the 2019-20 black summer bushfires on the wellbeing of emergency services personnel.*](#) Perth: Graduate School of Education, The University of Western Australia.

After the Fires investigates the impacts of the 2019–20 bushfires¹ on emergency services personnel, addresses key gaps in knowledge about how to foster resilience and coping, and investigates how to deliver effective support for mental health and wellbeing to Australian bushfire first responders.

The lead for this study, David Lawrence, was the lead for the Beyond Blue (2018) report Answering the Call. Over 4,000 personnel across fire and rescue, rural fire and state emergency service (SES) agencies across Australia participated in the After the Fires survey.

This report presents the findings of the first survey – which is a baseline measure of mental health and wellbeing of first responders after the Black Summer. As mental health concerns can emerge two years or more after the initial traumatic fire events, this research will evaluate both shorter- and longer-term impacts by surveying emergency service personnel again and conduct additional focus groups and interviews.

Facts and Stats about the emergency

- An estimated 82,480 personnel were involved in responding to the Black Summer bushfires, including 64,500 volunteers and 17,980 employees
- 66,300 personnel were directly involved in firefighting including 53,200 volunteers and 13,100 employees
- Volunteers spent on average 3 weeks and employees on average 4 weeks responding to the fires. In addition, 30% of employees volunteered additional time, contributing on average an additional 3 weeks
- 13,800 volunteers and 3,100 employees travelled interstate to help fight fires.

Mental health and wellbeing of personnel

- 4.5% of volunteers and 5.1% of employees who responded to the fires had probable PTSD at the time of the survey, representing an estimated 2,900 volunteers and 920 employees

¹ In total, 33 lives were lost in the Black Summer, more than 3,000 homes were destroyed, wildlife was decimated, and over 20 million hectares of community and farming land and national parks were burnt.



- 4.6% of volunteers and 5.5% of employees had very high psychological distress indicative of serious mental illness, representing an estimated 3,000 volunteers and 1,000 employees (compared with 4.0% in the Australian population)
- 10.5% of volunteers and 14.5% of employees had high psychological distress indicative of less severe mental illness which would benefit from treatment (compared with 8.0% of the Australian population)
- 4.6% of volunteers and 4.9% of employees had seriously considered ending their own life in the year following the fires, 1.6% of volunteers and 2.3% of employees had a suicide plan, and 0.2% of volunteers and 0.3% of employees had attempted suicide (Rates of suicidal ideation and suicide plans were about twice as high as in the general population)

Experience of traumatic or life-threatening events

31% of volunteers and 25% of employees had felt there was a time when their life was threatened when responding

22% of volunteers and 19% of employees had experienced one or more traumatic events that affected them deeply during their response

4,150 volunteers and 1,040 employees who were exposed to traumatic or life-threatening events during the bushfires had indicators of high need for mental health support – either probable PTSD, very high psychological distress or suicidal ideation (this is 2,540 and 520 personnel more than would have been expected to have such needs in the absence of the bushfires).

Mental Health need, help seeking behaviours and psychological support

58% of volunteers and 52% of employees expressed a high need for mental health support – either probable PTSD, very high psychological distress or suicidal ideation – but had not received any mental health treatment in the 12 months following the fires

Of those who received help, 32% of volunteers and 31% of employees reported that the help they received was provided through their organisation and the remainder obtained help outside of their organisation.

Only 16% of volunteers and 22% of employees with high need for mental health support felt they received as much help as they needed.

There are over 5,000 people who faced traumatic or life-threatening events while responding to the bushfires who have high need for mental health support, more than double the rate that would be expected. Around 1,000 of these have received a sufficient level of support for their needs.