

The bushfires of the 2019-20 Australian *Black Summer* fire season saw widespread destruction caused by fires of unprecedented magnitude, duration and intensity. In total, 33 lives were lost, 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.



82,480

personnel responded 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.



4.5%
volunteers



& 5.1%
employees

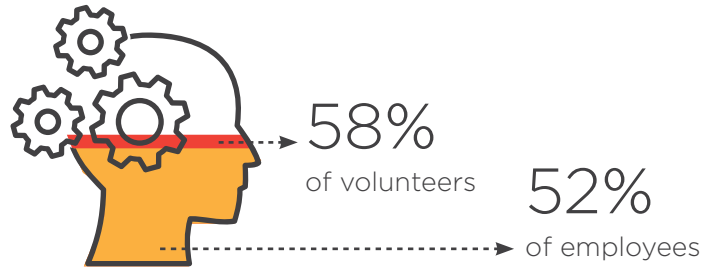
Among personnel responding to the 2019-20 bushfires, **4.5% of volunteers** and **5.1% of employees** had probable PTSD at the time of the survey, representing an estimated **2,900 volunteers** and **920 employees**.

IN THE YEAR FOLLOWING THE FIRES...

4.6% 4.9%
of volunteers of employees
seriously considered ending their own life

1.6% 2.3%
of volunteers of employees
had a suicide plan

0.2% 0.3%
of volunteers of employees
had attempted suicide



with high need for mental health support – either probable PTSD, very high psychological distress or suicidal ideation – **had not received any mental health treatment in the 12 months following the fires.**



31% of volunteers & 25% of employees

had felt **there was a time when their life was threatened when responding** to the 2019-20 bushfires.

(3,000 volunteers)

(1,000 employees)

4.6% of volunteers & 5.5% of employees

had **very high psychological distress indicative of serious mental illness**, compared with 4.0% of the Australian population.

Additionally,

10.5% of volunteers & 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.

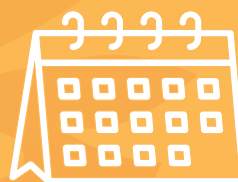


13,800

volunteers and

3,100

employees travelled interstate to help fight fires.



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**.

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.

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.

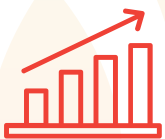
Key Findings



- **The study found that only 1 in 5 of those personnel who were experiencing mental health difficulties in the aftermath of the fires had received sufficient help or support** highlighting the ongoing need to monitor and support the wellbeing of those who have been adversely impacted by their experiences in the Black Summer fires. Over half of those had not received any support or treatment in the 12 months following the fires.



- **A clear challenge is Australia's ability to scale up the provision of support to impacted personnel following major disasters.** The capacity of support services is taxed in normal times and reserve capacity doesn't exist to provide a scaled response when needed, resulting in difficult decisions of where to prioritise and deploy existing resources, long waiting times or lack of access to support.



- **Although the study results found that traumatic experiences from the 2019-20 black summer fires did negatively impact some personnel, in most cases, these experiences added to existing cumulative exposure to trauma.** With large numbers of personnel exposed to traumatic experiences in 2019-20, if the warming and drying climate patterns result in more regular and more intense fires, the frequency of exposure to traumatic experiences and the number of people exposed is likely to increase.



- As well as identifying a group of responders who still need help to deal with the impacts of their experiences, **the study identified challenges that should be addressed in forward planning and future preparedness: how can we build capacity and scale up mental health support when required in the wake of major disaster events?** and, how can we plan to support the increasing number of volunteers and employees in the sector who will be exposed to more frequent cumulative traumas?

DOWNLOAD THE FULL REPORT HERE:

WWW.UWA.EDU.AU/PROJECTS/AFTER-THE-FIRES

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