



## UNIQUE BUSHFIRE STUDY REVEALS LINGERING TRAUMA

A unique study has revealed that a high proportion of people affected by the Canberra bushfires of 2003 have suffered lingering Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

The study into the impact of the bushfires undertaken by the Centre for Mental Health Research at ANU focused on a representative selection of 2085 young ACT adults from the age of 24 to 28.

They had already been interviewed as part of the Centre's PATH Through Life Project, a prospective longitudinal investigation of depression and anxiety, substance use and cognitive ability throughout the adult life span.

The study, by Dr Ruth Parslow, Professor Anthony Jorm and Professor Helen Christensen, was based on interviews undertaken in 1999, and a fresh set of interviews three to 18 months following the bushfires. Four people were killed in the bushfires in January 2003, 5000 Canberra residents were evacuated, 440 people went to hospital with fire related injuries and 488 houses were destroyed.

Of the 2085 participants in the study, 79.2 per cent reported at least one bushfire experience, and over 60 per cent lived in areas that were put on alert. A total of 746 participants, or 36 per cent, reported experiencing one or more symptoms of PTSD in the week prior to the second round of interviews.

"When we re-interviewed these young people, they were asked about their experiences of trauma threat, uncontrollable and controllable traumatic experiences, and their reaction to the fire," Dr Parslow said.

"Four fifths of participants were exposed to the trauma of the bushfires, with around 50 per cent reporting that they had experienced uncontrollable traumatic events. Particular fire experiences, including being evacuated and feeling very distressed during the disaster were more strongly associated with PTSD symptoms, compared with pre-trauma measures," she said.

"When PTSD screening criteria were applied, 104 participants, or 5 per cent of all participants, were assessed as suffering from PTSD. Six per cent of those with direct experience of the fire screened positive. This compares with a prevalence level of 1.5 per cent recently reported in a national study examining all types of trauma."

The study showed little difference between ongoing trauma suffered by people who had been in an uncontrolled situation, such as being evacuated at short notice, and those who had tried to exercise some form of control over the fires by protecting their homes.

"The unplanned compulsory evacuation was often done reluctantly or evaded, and such evacuation could be perceived as the final loss of control over the safety of the respondents' homes and families. This type of loss of control has previously found to be a risk factor for PTSD," Dr Parslow said.

AFFIRM

Building 63

Canberra ACT 0200

P: +61 2 6125 1033

F: + 61 2 6125 0733

E: [affirm@affirm.org.au](mailto:affirm@affirm.org.au)

[www.affirm.org.au](http://www.affirm.org.au)



*..continued*

THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY



AFFIRM  
THE AUSTRALIAN FOUNDATION FOR  
MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH

“Both controllable and uncontrollable activities contributed independently to PTSD. Anecdotal evidence suggested that fighting the fires may have initially been perceived as more controllable, but became more difficult as water pressure dropped and random ‘spot fires’ began.

“The study revealed that those most likely to suffer from PTSD symptoms were females, those with less education, or who had depression and anxiety before the fires, people who were evacuated from home or work during the fires and those who had a friend or relative die or experience injury as a result of the fires.”

The Director of the Centre for Mental Health Research, Professor Helen Christensen, said the study was unique.

“Most studies of trauma are retrospective, but the PATH Through Life study meant that we could take the ‘before and after’ opportunity to study a genuine traumatic event which had a widespread impact on the Canberra community,” Professor Christensen said.

“We hope that the results of the study will be used by health authorities to offer significant ongoing assistance to people affected by the bushfires.”

Dr Parslow is Research Fellow, Orygen Research Centre, University of Melbourne and Visiting Fellow, Centre for Mental Health Research, ANU.

Media contact for the Australian Foundation for Mental Health Research: Niree Creed, 0418 625 595

AFFIRM

Building 63

Canberra ACT 0200

P: +61 2 6125 1033

F: + 61 2 6125 0733

E: [affirm@affirm.org.au](mailto:affirm@affirm.org.au)

[www.affirm.org.au](http://www.affirm.org.au)

