Supporting young people following the February 2009 Victorian bushfires: The views of professionals

Aaron Ross Bingham

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Department of Social Work
School of Health Sciences
Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry & Health Sciences
The University of Melbourne

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to better understand professionals’ views of service and community support provided to young people following the February 2009 Victorian bushfires (‘the bushfires’). Currently there is little research focused specifically on young people and natural disasters. The aim of this research was to contribute to improved levels of support for young people in the event of any future natural disaster.

Ten professionals were interviewed for the research project, all of whom had direct professional experience in supporting young people affected by the bushfires. The respondents provided their views on the main topic of the study – the service and community response to support young people following the bushfires. They also contributed to investigation of the secondary topic of the study, by discussing the problems with the response to young people following the bushfires.

The findings highlight the importance of supporting young people’s family relationships and peer relationships. The study also concluded that services need a high level of creativity and flexibility when providing support to young people; external services entering a community for the first time should support existing community structures such as local schools, youth groups and community organisations.

Many of the findings drawn from the study hold implications for future practice and future research in natural disasters. As natural disasters are increasing in frequency globally, young people and their communities will continue to be significantly affected and the need for this type of research will also increase.
Declaration

This is to certify that:

i. The thesis comprises only my original work towards the Masters,

ii. Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,

iii. The thesis is less than 30,000 words in length, exclusive of bibliographies and appendices.

Signed:

Aaron Ross Bingham
Acknowledgements

I would like to pay tribute to all those who lost their lives in the February 2009 Victorian bushfires, and to their families and friends. I acknowledge the pain and devastation that these bushfires caused, and the enormity of the human suffering that occurred.

Thank you to my supervisors, Associate Professor Lou Harms, and Dr David Rose (School of Social Work, University of Melbourne). Their guidance and support was incredible throughout the entire research project, and their expertise was invaluable in helping me to complete this thesis.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The 7th of February 2009 was the day an unprecedented firestorm swept through many of Victoria’s rural areas, claiming 173 lives and destroying millions of dollars in property (2009 Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission, 2010). Two rural shires were heavily affected: the Shire of Murrindindi and the neighboring Shire of Nillumbik. Over 40% of the Murrindindi Shire and 22% of the Nillumbik shire land area were burnt as a result of the bushfires. Tragically, 95 people perished within the Murrindindi shire, and 41 people perished within the Nillumbik Shire. Many people within the communities lost loved ones, homes and livelihoods, with the impact still being felt strongly to this day.

My desire to conduct research into how young people were supported following the February 2009 Victorian bushfires developed from the role that I initially performed as a debriefing social worker, supporting both survivors and emergency services workers in the immediate aftermath of the bushfires. In addition, from December 2010, I worked as a social worker supporting young people and families in the Whittlesea, Kinglake and Nillumbik Shire areas who were recovering from the bushfires. These experiences helped create an interest in better understanding how young people were supported following the bushfires.

One of the particular issues I observed that raised my interest in this topic was the varying methods that services employed to reach out and support young people. Some responses I observed appeared to be successful, while others clearly failed to gain significant traction in the community and to make an impact. Through my discussions with community members, young people and service providers, I listened to many different perspectives on what they considered to be effective in supporting young people.

I formed the view that there was a need to produce a better and deeper understanding of the factors that supported young people following the bushfires, one which could inform the response to young people in the event of any future disaster. My research project focused on the February 2009 Victorian bushfires, specifically examining professionals’
views of the service and community responses intended to support young people following the bushfires.

1.1 Background to the study

When a disaster like a bushfire strikes, it has an immediate and ongoing effect on young people, disrupting an important period of their life (Wyn, 2014). The effects of the February 2009 Victorian bushfires reached throughout many rural Victorian communities, causing significant disruption, with many people losing family, friends, homes and businesses. Young people experienced the loss of the bushfires as significantly as other members of the community, but they faced unique challenges due to the developmental life stage they were transitioning through. The tasks and challenges for young people in this period of their development are vastly different to those in other life stages that they have previously crossed and that they will navigate in the future (Harms, 2010).

Disaster responses should be informed by quality research, and I hope that my research will contribute to appropriate disaster responses for young people in the future. In the aftermath of a disaster like the February 2009 Victorian bushfires, there is an opportunity to reflect on responses that were positive and supportive to young people’s recovery. There is also a chance to look at how these responses can be supported, replicated or changed in the event of a future disaster, and what mistakes could be avoided.

1.2 Aim and scope of the study

The aim of the study was to gain a descriptive understanding of service providers views of the response to support young people in the months and years following the bushfires. The main research question for the study was 'what are the professionals’ views of the service and community response to support young people following the February 2009 Victorian bushfires?' The secondary research question was ‘what were the problems with the response?’ The study did not try to ascertain whether service
providers believed that young people had ‘recovered’ or not, or where professionals believed the young people were at in their recovery process.

### 1.3 Overview of method

A purposive sample of 10 support professionals were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview. These professionals were recruited from the various support service areas within the bushfire-affected local communities, and were chosen to take part in the interviews based on their professional roles supporting young people following the bushfires. Respondents came from professional backgrounds and included community youth workers, school welfare coordinators, local council youth workers, psychologists, bushfire recovery program managers and professional counsellors.

The interviews were semi-structured. The questions initially focused on what the support professionals believed that young people required at various stages following the bushfires. The participants were then asked what services and supports they perceived as being most effective in supporting young people’s recovery. Following this, a series of open-ended questions were asked about how the response could have been different, and what initiatives could be implemented to support young people in the event of any future disaster.

### 1.4 The geographic focus of the study

The study focuses on two local government areas within the state of Victoria: the Shires of Murrindindi and Nillumbik. I sought professionals’ views related to young people living within these two Shires.

The Shire of Murrindindi was home to approximately 14,400 people before the bushfires in 2009, and it is estimated that it is home to around 13,500 people today. Around nine percent of the Shires’ population was between 15 and 25 years of age in 2009 (ABS, 2008). The Shire of Murrindindi is located about one and half hour’s drive north-east of Melbourne, and includes the towns of Alexandra, Eildon, Kinglake, Yea,
Flowerdale, Marysville and Narbethong. The Shire's economy mainly consists of agriculture, forestry and tourism.

The Shire of Nillumbik is substantially larger than the Shire of Murrindindi and is currently home to approximately 60,342 people, with around 15% of the Shire’s population being aged between 15 and 25 years of age at the time of the bushfires (ABS, 2008). The Shire’s economy mainly consists of agriculture, forestry, tourism and the arts (see Appendix A).

1.5 An overview of the thesis

Following the introduction to the study in Chapter One, Chapter Two begins by examining the literature on youth experiences and trauma responses during bushfires and natural disasters. This includes the various factors that play a role in young people’s perceptions and responses during a natural disaster. The chapter then addresses the interventions that the literature states can aid youth recovery following a natural disaster, whilst also looking at literature on the Australian experience of bushfires and natural disasters. Lastly, the chapter explores development issues in adolescents and young adults.

Chapter Three describes the methods used in the project to recruit and gather data from professionals operating in the Shires of Nillumbik and Murrindindi. I detail and explain the interviews I conducted and the research that took place. Chapter Four presents the results of the interviews with professionals.

Chapter Five discusses the findings in light of the literature and discusses the findings that can be drawn from the study. Finally Chapter Six covers the conclusions of the research, including the limitations of the research, and recommendations for future research.
Chapter 2: Literature review

This chapter begins with an exploration of the literature covering young people and disasters, including the developmental issues young people can face. The chapter goes on to examine the literature relating to young people and the various challenges they can face following a disaster, concluding with a discussion of the literature that focuses on supporting young people following a disaster (see Appendix B).

Current research and literature supports the need for this type of research to take place (La Greca & Silverman, 2009). There is currently a lack of research globally specifically focused on young people following a natural disaster, with even less being specific to young people within an Australian context. The February 2009 Victorian bushfires were one of the worst peacetime disasters that Australia has ever seen. The knowledge and understanding that can be gleaned from research into the aftermath of a disaster of this magnitude is considerable.

Research suggests that 20% of Australian men and 16% of women will be affected by a natural disaster in their lifetime. Climate change has become increasingly acknowledged as causing extreme weather events leading to some natural disasters, meaning these statistics could be set to rise (McFarlane, 2005 as cited in Caruana, 2010). Caruana (2010) emphasises that it is important to note that every natural disaster is unique to each respective community, and each community will respond in a different way.

2.1 Young people and disasters

The findings in this study are discussed in the light of the youth and human development literature, with specific reference to the significant disruption to a young person’s development that a disaster can cause. In the following sections of this chapter I explore the development of young people between the ages of 12 and 25 years. Within this age group two main developmental stages are discussed, including adolescence and early adulthood.
Young people and ‘youth’ are defined in the study as persons aged 12–25 years at the time of the bushfires. The ages at which individuals are defined as ‘young people’ or ‘youth’ has been the focus of some discussion in the past, with young people traditionally being seen as being between the ages of 12–18 years within Western cultures. However due to a change in the nature of economies, educational pathways and family life, youth transitions to adulthood have been seen to be extended in recent years (Wyn, 2014).

2.1.1 Adolescent development

Adolescence is commonly seen as the teenage years of a young person’s life, between 12 to 19 years of age. Adolescents encounter biological, psycho-spiritual and social transitions throughout this stage of development. Some of the major biological changes that occur for young people during these years include hormonal changes during the onset of puberty, and the psycho-social and sexual changes that are linked to this (Harms, 2010). There are also weight, height and nutritional changes, including brain development, with the adolescent brain still undergoing significant growth and change. Changes in sleep patterns are also a major component of adolescent development, with adolescents often needing longer sleeping hours than adults for them to function effectively (Harms, 2010).

As well as biological changes, young people experience psycho-social-spiritual changes in adolescence. The first of these changes is cognitive: hypothetical and abstract thought becomes possible for young people, which helps them become more self-reflective and self-conscious (Harms, 2010). Emotional change and development is also a big part of adolescence, when it is common for young people to experience more frequent highs and lows of emotion. This is often associated with the biological changes occurring within the young person’s body, but also as they navigate new situations and search for identity (Harms, 2010).

The development of new relationships and significant changes to existing ones is a noteworthy part of the psycho-spiritual changes that occur in adolescence. For the first time in their lives, adolescents are developing significant intimate relationships with
people outside the family home in the wider community (Harms, 2010). Young people’s peer groups take on a greater significance in their lives and become much more important than they once were. The existing relationship with their parents also encounters substantial change, with young people still being extremely reliant on their parents; however, the young person will often become increasingly self-directive and independent (Harms, 2010).

2.1.2 Early adulthood development

Following adolescence, young people transition into early adulthood, which is characteristically between 19 and 25 years of age. The concept of early adulthood and the nature of adulthood has changed significantly in the past century. There is debate around the exact way that things have changed, but it is widely accepted that since the significant social changes in the 1980s and 1990s in Western countries like Australia, there has been substantial changes in how young people work, live and learn in early adulthood (Wyn, 2014).

Early adulthood transitions are often precarious, and young people often experience an unstable transition at this stage of development (Wyn, 2014). Central to this stage is the temporal nature of early adulthood, with complex educational requirements, unstable work and precarious finances making it increasingly difficult for young adults to maintain strong interpersonal connections (Hall et al., 2009). Despite the complexities in maintaining relationships, young people are often reliant on a complex social structure of support to help them navigate through this stage of life.

One of the biggest changes affecting young adults in recent decades is the major global economic change that has occurred globally, resulting in increasingly open economies, global competition for labour and decreased job security for young adults (Wyn, 2014). This has meant that young people have often had to stay in formal education longer to be able to obtain the skills they need to compete in the labour market. This in turn has seen young people take on larger amounts of debt, become more dependent on their parents and welfare for financial support, and marry later than previous generations.
This phenomenon has subsequently given rise to the term ‘extended adolescence’ for young people in their twenties.

### 2.1.3 Understanding disasters

Disasters have been occurring with increasing frequency and intensity in recent decades. Local communities, households and individuals have been affected around the world by both natural and man-made disasters at an increasingly growing rate (Twigg, 2005). They can affect a broad range of people, and do not make distinctions based on ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, age or geographical location.

To understand the emotional effects of a disaster on an individual, researchers will often look at the various reactions that can present in the individual following the disaster. The reactions can include anxiety, anger, depression, psychological distress and post-traumatic stress (Braun-Lewensohn, 2013).

Individuals will often cope with the aftermath of a disaster by utilising a variety of internal and external resources. These resources can include personal internal strengths such as mental resilience, positivity, coping and adaptation mechanisms, and spiritual resources. External supports can also have a major bearing on people coping with a natural disaster; these can include family and community relationships, access to counselling and mental health services, stable accommodation and material aid, and positive progress in the overall community recovery.

Disasters can also have an effect on the community as a whole, disrupting and changing the arrangements of everyday life. The existing social process of a community can be impacted, disrupting people's normal lives and the wider associations to which they are connected, including their social systems, cultural environments and communities (Prince, 1920). The community’s confidence and belief that people do not have to face dire threats to life and wellbeing is damaged in the aftermath of a disaster. There is often a large adjustment following the disaster to the assumptions and attitudes that the community held about their safety prior to the disaster (Gordon, 2007).
The social structure that was in place before the disaster often does not re-emerge for some time. A new temporary system can form, with community members adopting new and improvised roles in response to what has occurred. New community leaders will arise, and the individual community members will organise themselves into a collective group of mutual aid (Gordon, 2007).

2.1.4 Post-disaster support and developmental issues

Young people now live vastly different lives to those of the generations that have gone before them, but they still have many of the same challenges as past generations; this includes developing competence and experience in areas such as education, employment, family and community life. The transitions that young people are undertaking can still be increasingly complex, with young people (as already noted) often needing to stay in education a lot longer to gain the skills needed to secure employment, in an unpredictable and often transient employment market (Wyn, 2014). This can make it more difficult for young people to maintain strong personal connections with family and friends, as these connections become less stable and more transitory. Maintaining healthy relationships within this context comes with greater difficulty for many young people, meaning they have fewer external resources to call upon for support in the event of a disaster.

Financial vulnerability is especially apparent with young people; as they are required to be in education for longer periods, they are often reliant on student support payments from the government and low-paying part-time jobs. One result of this development is that young people are increasingly reliant on their parents until a later stage in their development, with many remaining in the family home well into their twenties. The family of origin will often remain a core of support for young people, providing support both financially and emotionally. This can mean, in the event of a disaster, young people have less personal financial resources to call upon, and less financial capacity to deal with the financial shock that a disaster can bring (Harms, 2010).

Adolescent and early adulthood developmental considerations have many implications for the post-disaster support of young people. At a time of great developmental change
for both adolescents and young adults, a disaster directly affecting young people and their communities will cause significant disruption to their lives and add to the instability of the personal transitions they are moving through. Without appropriate support and resource input following a disaster, young people can be left particularly vulnerable.

2.2 Young people following a disaster

2.2.1 Young people’s family relationships

The factors present within a young person’s family can have a significant impact on a young person following a natural disaster. These factors can include the marital status of their parents, family stability, educational attainment, the family’s social support network, and the psychological functioning of parents (Davis & Siegel, 2000). New and unfamiliar uncertainties for the family unit can also occur as a result of the natural disaster, and coping with these can prove difficult for a young person. These uncertainties can include the young person being unsure about the future, including the living arrangements for the family, anxiety around work status and schooling for family members, and being unsure of the general wellbeing of family and friends following the disaster (Davis & Siegel, 2000).

The normal functioning of a family can be severely disrupted following a disaster. The regular family routine undertakes significant change, as new family priorities linked to the recovery take precedence. Strains on the family dynamic can form through the pressure of facilitating and enacting tasks related to the disaster recovery. In the most difficult circumstances, families are faced with loss of life or property within the family due to the disaster (Rowe et.al, 2008).

When family functioning is weak following a disaster there can be long-term consequences for a young person. McFarlane’s (1987) bushfire study found that families who did not communicate and share their immediate reactions following a disaster were more likely to have trouble with their long-term adjustment. Socially and
economically disadvantaged families can be especially vulnerable following a disaster; single-parent families can be at higher risk due to having fewer resources to rely on – they can feel the loss of any social supports more acutely (Solomon & Smith, 1994).

Families are increasingly being recognised as pivotal in either helping the recovery of young people or doing the opposite by increasing distress and regression (Caruana, 2010). Families that experience a lot of arguments can be negatively perceived by a young person, and create the perception of a lack of family support. This perceived lack of support results in greater distress for the young person and can negatively affect their ability to recover (Bokszczanin, 2008).

Some empirical studies have shown that higher levels of parental support are associated with better outcomes for young people following a natural disaster (La Greca et al., 1996). Elements of the parental relationship that can contribute to positive outcomes, include young people being given regular periods of undivided attention from their parents, and having parents show empathy and warmth towards them on a regular basis (Bokszczanin, 2008). In many instances young people will look to their parents to see how they should respond to and perceive a disaster, gauging their parent’s emotions and behavior in relation to the event (Baggerly et al., 2008).

A study focusing on young people aged 18–27 years was conducted in the Gippsland region of Victoria following the February 2009 Victorian bushfires. The researchers examined young people’s formal and informal social support networks, with a goal of informing delivery of social support services for young adults post-bushfire (Forbes et al., 2012). Young people reported that they often felt they were not acknowledged as autonomous individuals who had suffered real personal loss, with their needs being unheard due to being perceived as a dependent adolescent. They spoke of the complex nature of the relationships with their family following the bushfires, while acknowledging that their family provided a large amount of support following the disaster. Young people saw the validation of their experience as being a vital part of their recovery support, and if they were not acknowledged as autonomous individuals having suffered real personal loss, they felt excluded from key supports (Forbes et al, 2012).
The young people in Forbes et al’s (2012) study believed that how an individual, community or service provider framed loss had a significant impact on entitlement to resources after the disaster and how their needs were met. More specifically, they believed that how young people were framed as either adult or adolescent impacted on how their needs were met.

2.2.2 Young people’s social supports

Wider social supports can be important to a young person’s recovery following a natural disaster. Pina, Villalta, Ortiz, Gottschall, & Weems’ (2008) study of 46 young people following Hurricane Katrina found that social supports such as teachers, friends and church members helped to protect young people from the full negative impact of hurricane exposure. The study looked at the impact of young people's exposure to the hurricane, and the influence of the social environment, including discrimination and social support, on young people. They found when young people had the perception of increased support and care from these wider social supports, they had much better mental health outcomes (Pina et al., 2008).

The aftermath of a natural disaster can see local resources significantly depleted, due to the loss of important community property and possessions. This collective loss can have a significant effect on young people and their families. Following a natural disaster, the ability of the families to access community supports can be completely inhibited, due to the breakdown of the family unit or the collapse of community supports and structures (Rowe et al, 2008). Due to the disaster being shared by community members as a collective, the people who would usually provide direct support within the community are most likely victims themselves (Norris & Kaniasty, 1996).

Young people are at a stage in their development where they are very sensitive to peer perceptions and the social relationships in which they are involved (DeNigris, 2007). A young person can feel rejected and different to their peers who have not experienced the disaster, and this can exacerbate feelings of powerlessness and the sense of betrayal that often occurs following a disaster (DeNigris, 2007). Many young people also begin to withdraw from their friends and isolate following a disaster, affecting their relationships
negatively (Balk & Corr, 2001). The security that a young person may have felt within their friendship groups and peer relationships before the disaster can be often be lost.

Post-traumatic stress symptoms following the disaster can have also an impact on young people and their peer relationships. This was demonstrated in a study focusing on 166 high school students living around the Gulf of Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina. The study found that young people who had been exposed to Hurricane Katrina had an increased probability of exhibiting post-traumatic stress symptoms following the disaster. These symptoms often included increased anger and aggression, which had a negative impact on their relationships with other young people (Marsee, 2008).

Young people who respond with aggressive tendencies following a disaster have an increased likelihood of being rejected and victimized by their peers, and as a result they can suffer difficulty adjusting back to school life (Dodge et. al, 1997). As young people are often looking to their peer group as they form a healthy self-image, this can have long-term ramifications for their development (DeNigris, 2007).

2.2.3 Young people’s individual characteristics

The personal characteristics of a young person before a natural disaster can have a significant effect on their recovery following the event. This was demonstrated in a study conducted by Deković, Koning, Stams, Geert & Buist (2008), in which 45 adolescents completed a questionnaire following a fire in a small and close community on the Netherlands coast. They found in their research that the pre-existing circumstances in a young persons' life were the greatest predictors of distress after the disaster had occurred.

Some of the factors identified in Deković and colleagues’ work included individual characteristics such as the young person’s personality and coping style; these elements overshadowed issues such as the proximity of the young person to the disaster and the social support they received following the disaster (Deković et al., 2008). Deković et al (2008) indicated that their findings were consistent with other literature, showing that avoidant, passive coping skills are associated with negative outcomes for young people following a disaster.
Nygaard, Jensen, & Dyb’s (2010) study of sibling groups who experienced the 2004 South East Asian Tsunami reinforces the notion that a young person’s pre-disaster coping ability has a bearing on their recovery. Thirty-eight pairs of siblings aged between six years to seventeen years of age were interviewed for the study. The researchers found that siblings responded to the traumatic event with similar levels of distress and post-trauma reactions as random pairs of children experiencing the same event. Contrary to what was expected, sibling reports of distress were not significantly interrelated, showing that each child and young person’s individual experience can vary greatly.

2.2.4 Young people’s mental health

Young people who experience natural disasters often report high levels of posttraumatic stress (Bal, 2008; La Greca & Silverman, 2009). Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is the most common mental health disorder in young people following a natural disaster (Yule, 2001). PTSD has a biological effect on the young person’s brain and body, with physical symptoms often lasting for a significant period of time, as the body can be pushed back into ‘fight or flight mode’ at the slightest evocation of a memory of the disaster (Bal, 2008; Davis & Siegel, 2000).

In his research on the effects of the 1999 Marmara earthquake, Bal (2008) investigated PTSD symptoms in young people three years after the disaster occurred. He conducted a representative sample survey of 293 young people, with 56 per cent reporting severe PTSD symptoms. The study found that the level of exposure to the disaster and the young person’s gender were significantly associated with severity of the PTSD symptoms.

Bal’s (2008) study had very different findings to those of Yelland, Robinson, Lock, La Greca, Kokegei, Ridgway & Lai’s (2010) research. Yelland and colleagues measured the PTSD symptoms of 155 youth affected by the 2005 South Australian bushfires. The study found 27 per cent of young people reported moderate to severe PTSD symptoms; the main factors contributing to PTSD included age and developmental levels, and the amount of exposure to the bushfire the young person had received.
2.2.5 Substance use by young people

Several studies have demonstrated an increase in young people self-medicating with various substances following a disaster. In a study focusing on 170 African-American males following Hurricane Ike in Houston, Texas, a link was found between higher drug use and self-medication among young people with post-traumatic stress reactions. The study found that young people would use substances to try and keep themselves from thinking or talking about the disaster to which they had been exposed (Peters et al, 2010).

In their critical review of the empirical literature around youth trauma and substance abuse, Blumenthal, Blanchard, Feldner, Babson, Leen-Feldner, & Dixon (2008) found that multiple types of substance use are highly related to exposure to a traumatic event, and post-disaster stress reactions among young people. The review acknowledged that there was minimal knowledge about the correlation between trauma and substance abuse, and that more research in this area was required. Parslow and Jorm (2006) discovered similar findings in their research, with tobacco consumption increasing among young Canberrans after they were exposed to a major bushfire in 2003. The study covered 2,063 young people, who were interviewed in the year 2000 and again in 2004. One year after the bushfire occurred they assessed changes in participants’ level of tobacco consumption over the four-year period, their level of exposure, their immediate emotional response and their fire-related PTSD symptoms. The level of smoking among young people who started or resumed cigarette smoking after the bushfire was associated with the level of exposure to the natural disaster.

Erskine et al. (2013) explored the impact of an earthquake in Christchurch in 2010 on smoking status in adult and young people. The study had a sample size of 1,001 people, with semi structured interviews carried out 15 months after the earthquake. The study found that 24% of people who had quit smoking prior to the earthquakes resumed their smoking habit following the natural disaster. One-third of people smoking at the time of the earthquake increased their tobacco consumption. Virtually all participants who relapsed into their smoking habit quoted the earthquake and associated stress as a reason to take up smoking again (Erskine et al, 2013).
2.2.6 Post-traumatic growth in young people

Post-traumatic growth can occur in young people following a disaster, when they experience a level of personal development and growth as a result (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Many young people who experience a disaster subsequently become more resilient through the experience; they will often develop a deeper appreciation of life, have an increased love for family, and experience strengthened emotional bonds with others as result of what they have been through. Post-traumatic growth can be influenced by a variety of factors, including the young person’s pre-trauma mental state, the amount of social support received after the disaster, and the young person’s individual coping behaviours (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Wolchik et al. (2008) examined 50 young people who had experienced the death of a parent in either childhood or adolescence. The study was conducted over a six-year period in which young people and their families were interviewed four times. The authors found that adaptive coping was the main trait of youth who experienced post-traumatic growth. These coping efforts included seeking support from surviving relatives, who promoted constructive information processing that altered thoughts and led to post-traumatic growth in the young people.

2.3 Supporting young people following a disaster

This chapter follows on from the issues that young people can encounter following a disaster by looking at the literature that focuses on supporting young people post-disaster. This includes family-focused interventions, professional support and counselling interventions, school-based support and young people being involved in the disaster recovery themselves.

2.3.1 Supporting young people within their family context

Sandler (2001) stated that young people experience stress from a disaster in a multi-layered, interrelated, ecological context, which includes family, school, and community-
level influences on the young person's life. DeNigris (2007) took the view that intervention strategies must target the multiple levels that comprise a young person’s life. Professionals should aim to empower both young people and their parents by adopting a multi-systemic perspective, and have achievable goals in each system of their lives.

Researchers and professionals give family-focused interventions overwhelming endorsement for their effectiveness in supporting young people’s recovery following a disaster. Rowe and Liddle (2008) found that in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, families who worked with counsellors experienced significant benefits. Counsellors were able to help reduce risk factors for young people and improve their coping skills. Areas in which counsellors helped included parental stress, family conflict and positive parent-child relationships.

Rowe and Liddle (2008) conducted a randomised clinical trial of young people referred for substance abuse and related problems following Hurricane Katrina. They compared family therapy interventions with other, more traditional interventions such as cognitive behavioural therapy. The family therapy, which was multi-dimensional in nature, attempted to influence the young person's recovery by intervening in as many aspects of the young person’s life as possible, with priority given to the young person’s family (Rowe & Liddle, 2008). The results of the study showed that for young people with high stress and trauma symptoms as a result of Hurricane Katrina, multi-dimensional family therapy treatment delivered by counselling professionals was critical for reducing substance abuse and emotional distress.

Kilmer & Gil-Rivas (2008) also encouraged counselling professionals to work directly with the parents of young people following a disaster. This can occur by supporting and guiding parental efforts, through educating them about young people’s reactions to trauma and disasters. Kilmer & Gil-Rivas (2008) went on to assert that counselling professionals and parents can work together to recognise and build on young people’s strengths and capabilities, especially those that are related to post-traumatic growth, including the young person’s self-esteem, future vision and direction.
2.3.2 Counselling support for young people

Young people are typically averse to any type of professional counselling support (DeNigris, 2007). Despite this, the literature includes several studies that show a positive correlation between young people receiving counselling support and making a recovery following a disaster. A study conducted by Pina et al. (2008) surveyed 46 young people following Hurricane Katrina, examining supports young people received and what helped their recovery. They found a positive relationship between help from professional counselling support sources and young people recovering from PTSD.

Crisis intervention outreach counselling is widely used in disaster relief, especially in the early period of the disaster; this differs from many traditional counselling models. Crisis counselling is a short-term counselling intervention, which works with the intent to restore a young person’s functioning and prevent long-term mental health problems (DeNigris, 2007). One of the main forms of crisis intervention is critical incident stress debriefing. Critical incident stress debriefing provides an opportunity for a young person to relieve the immediate trauma-related distress through developing an understanding that their responses are normal reactions to trauma (La Greca & Silverman, 2009).

Cognitive behavioural therapy is a common therapeutic tool practitioners use to help young people who have suffered from a traumatic experience. It can help young people to examine, evaluate, and modify their automatic thoughts, enabling increased rational thinking and behaviours (DeNigris, 2007). Silverman, Ortiz, Viswesvaran, Burns, Kolko, Putnam & Jackson (2008) reviewed research on psychosocial treatments for children and young people conducted between 1993 and 2007. The outcomes were graded to the reported effectiveness of the different treatments, the study was not exclusively focused on natural disasters and covered a wide range of traumas incurred by young people. The results found that cognitive behavioural therapy was particularly effective in treating adolescents exposed to a traumatic event (Silverman et al., 2008).

Other therapeutic tools used by practitioners with young people following a disaster are exposure therapy and narrative therapy. Exposure therapy consists of imaginable and in vivo exposure, which can include the practitioner taking the young person back to the site of the trauma through either imagination or physically returning to the site after the
disaster (DeNigris, 2007). Narrative therapy is a unique therapeutic approach as it allows the young person to express their individual story and personal experience. It gives space for a personal story to emerge from the trauma and for the young person to create a narrative for the future (Rappleyea et al., 2008).

2.3.3 School-based support for young people

School-based support is considered vital in ensuring that young people are effectively engaged and supported following a disaster. Schools have a central role in many young people’s lives, often being the central linking point of many communities. Welfare and health services based inside a school can support the re-entry of young people attending the school following a disaster. Returning to school is widely acknowledged as a significant protective factor signaling the start of a gradual return to normal for young people, their families, and the wider community (Ager, Stark, Akesson, & Boothby, 2010).

In a study of the relevant literature, Mutch (2014) looked at recent disasters in mostly developed countries in order to explore the wider role of schools in disaster preparedness, response and recovery. Mutch (2014) found that a strong theme in the literature is schools acting as a ‘glue’ that holds a community together through the response and recovery phases. Of course, schools are primarily places of education but they can play a further set of roles in community and family awareness of hazard awareness and disaster mitigation. As places of pastoral care, they have staff – or can access appropriate personnel – with the skills and knowledge to attend to the social, emotional and psychological needs of children, young people and their families in the post-disaster context. Mutch (2014) found three main areas in which schools can support young people’s recovery following a disaster; these were as screeners of severe responses from young people, facilitators of appropriate recovery, and as community drop-in and re-bonding centres.

Following Hurricane Katrina, researchers conducted a study looking at the public health framework within schools following a disaster (Nastasi et al., 2011). School-based mental health services were identified as a potential mechanism through which gaps in
service delivery in the wider community could be addressed following a disaster. Nastasi et al. (2011) designed a curriculum to help students process the trauma of Hurricane Katrina, and effectively deal with the stressors they encountered as they transitioned back to their homes, schools and communities. Supporting the school-wide curriculum was a system of services that included ongoing teacher support and consultation, parent support and education, and individual and group therapy services for students. The majority of teachers reported that the implementation of the curriculum increased their ability to deal with student social-emotional issues, and helped them gain a better understanding of their students. Teachers reported feeling some anxiety about implementing the curriculum, and not feeling capable of responding to affected students adequately. In addition, 70% of the elementary school teachers and 92% of the middle/high school teachers reported that they made fewer student referrals for mental health services during the semester than in years past (Nastasi et al, 2011).

Another study investigated the outcomes of a community music therapy project which worked with a group of young people impacted by the February 2009 Victorian bushfires. Twenty-six young people participated in the music therapy project, which lasted for 10 weeks during the winter term of 2009. Most were referred to the program by teachers who were aware of the impact the fires had on their lives and were concerned about the young people’s behavior (McFerrin & Teggelove, 2011). Focus group interviews were performed with all young people involved a month after the conclusion of the project, with four common themes being identified by the young people: ‘group cohesion’; ‘something positive’; ‘opened a door’; and ‘able to be me’. McFerran & Teggelove (2011) stated that for young people, cohesion underpinned the personal and interpersonal achievements of the groups. They felt that when everybody was doing things together the group provided something positive in the form of fun and freedom. Music appeared to open a door to new experiences both musically and personally. These experiences provided a space for the young people to express themselves and over time they felt more confident about their abilities and less concerned about other people’s opinions, both within and beyond the group.
2.3.4 Young people participating in the recovery

Many individuals who receive support following a disaster are not simply passive recipients, but they are also actively involved in the recovery, providing support and help to others (Bokszczanin, 2012). Young people participating in the recovery process can be an effective way to support both their own recovery and the recovery of their community. The energy, physical ability and social mobility of young people can be an effective instrument in the response to a natural disaster. Young people are often willing to be involved in the recovery process following a natural disaster, and will look out for opportunities to support their local communities and have an active role in disaster relief (Anderson, 2005).

After his in-depth study of young people’s post-disaster needs in the Aceh province following the 2005 Boxing Day Tsunami, Rosati (2006) recommended that young people be included as an integral part of the community response to a disaster. He believed young people should be included in the broader assessment process, involving expanded consultations with young people, community planning, and interviews with key stakeholders. This can ensure that the needs and interests of young people are understood and taken into account, as future recovery efforts are developed.

Rosati (2006) stated that it is essential to create opportunities for young people to be involved in every stage of the planning and implementation process of recovery, helping young people’s voices to be heard at every level of the community. This process can be therapeutic for young people, as they deal with feelings of helplessness and uncertainty following a disaster. Engaging at a meaningful level in the recovery process can give young people a sense of empowerment and responsibility in the midst of devastation.

Following the Christchurch Earthquakes in 2010 and 2011, a Student Volunteer Army was founded, involving 13,000 young people at its highest point. They volunteered after both major earthquakes in Christchurch in September 2010 and February 2011, but also during the multiple aftershocks that subsequently hit the city. The Student Volunteer Army helped to clear 260,000 tons of silt, deliver 21,000 chemical toilets and distribute more than 500,000 leaflets, as well as laying sandbags and engaging in numerous other community and team-initiated projects (Lewis, 2013).
The Student Volunteer Army was instigated by young people, with social media such as Facebook, Gmail and Twitter all playing a role in mobilising the young people of Christchurch. The group made a deliberate effort to maintain a student identity, because they felt it would help garner more young people as volunteers. Students reacted overwhelmingly positively to the fact it was being run “by young people for young people” (Lewis, 2013).

Following a flood in a town of 20,000 people located in a mountainous area of southern Poland, Bokszczanin (2012) conducted a study in which 262 adolescents assessed their help-providing behaviours during and after the flood. The majority of respondents reported that they provided tangible, emotional and informational support to others in need following the disaster. Results from the study indicated that higher levels of support provided by young people following the flood were associated with higher levels of perceived social support, stronger sense of community, a greater propensity to cope with stress and greater levels of post-traumatic growth (Bokszczanin, 2012).

2.3.5 Young people and social media

Young people use social media to socialise, be entertained and to share their lives with one another. The ongoing effect, both positive and negative, of social media on young people is a subject of much debate (Gabriel, 2014). Social media is often a platform for young people to test and explore different identities as they develop; they share their lives with their friends, and have positive experiences most of the time, despite the popular belief that social media has a mainly negative effect on young people (Gabriel, 2014).

Social media has also been of benefit in public health campaigns targeting young people, and could help to improve outcomes for young people following a disaster (Livingstone et al., 2014). This was shown in a study of 438 young people that examined the outcomes of a social media campaign, focusing on improving attitudes towards mental health issues. One year following a brief social media campaign, improved overall attitudes towards mental health were observed in young people. The campaign was less effective at providing the tools young people need to feel capable of
helping someone experiencing mental health problems, and motivating them to engage in constructive behaviours related to mental health (Livingstone et al., 2014).

Some experts contend that social media is able to meet the informational needs of people better than traditional media in the aftermath of a disaster (van Leuven, 2009). According to Neubaum et al. (2014), there are four main ways in which people seek support on social media following a natural disaster: wanting to know what exactly happened and what might still happen, seeking expert knowledge on how to care for themselves, seeking stories and photographs of damage, and seeking recovery assistance (Neubaum et al., 2014).

Chapter Summary

Young people’s experience and response during and following a disaster can vary greatly. In this chapter I have reviewed literature on the effects on young people following disasters and bushfires, and explored some of the interventions enacted following previous disasters.

Some of the key findings of the chapter are that the key relationships in young people’s lives – notably their family and friends – are important to their recovery, and the effective facilitation of these relationships is essential for services working with young people. Young people being involved in the recovery effort is also important, giving them a sense of empowerment and purpose after the event.

A few previous Australian bushfire studies exist in the literature. Parslow and Jorm (2006) studied cigarette smoking amongst Canberra youth after a bushfire; this was the one of the only relevant research that had a focus on Australian youth and natural disasters, outside of the most recent bushfire research. Further research that incorporates systematic exploration of resilience and coping in young people, and the factors that promote healthy adjustment, is needed.

It is notable that few empirical research studies have focused on the effects of natural disasters on young people, whereas many have focused on the adult population. This is
surprising given the high percentage of young people that are exposed to natural disasters when they occur (La Greca & Silverman, 2009).
Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological approach taken in the study. Initially the chapter focuses on the research approach, which includes discussion of the reasoning behind the particular research approach that was taken. The chapter then moves on to describe the recruitment of participants for the study, and the study sample. The ethics approval process is mentioned, including the ethical considerations the study necessitated. Finally the chapter conveys the study’s interview schedule and methods of data analysis.

3.1 The research approach

The project had the stated aim of understanding professionals’ views of the service and community response to support young people following the February 2009 Victorian bushfires. The secondary research aim was to understand the problems with the response.

The study adopted a qualitative approach, which was seen as appropriate for the project’s goals due to its flexibility and ability to delve deeply into the meanings, interpretations and subjective experiences of the service providers working with young people (Liamputtong, 2009). It was hoped that the study would produce qualitative data to help bring a deeper understanding of what occurred following the bushfires (Todres, 2005).

The February 2009 Victorian bushfires affected many young people in varying ways, across a large geographical area. Those affected by the disaster included young people of different levels of socio-economic status and psychosocial development. It was anticipated that the research approach could bring some understanding to the different social contexts and settings of young people, helping to make sense of the many complex issues young people experienced (Baum, 2008). The approach attempted to take into account the holistic view of the professionals’ experience working with young
people, and the multiple realities and experiences that often exist in this context (Liamputtong, 2009).

3.1.1 Recruitment

A purposive sample of 10 support professionals who had worked with young people directly within bushfire-affected communities was recruited for the study. It was anticipated that the respondents would provide extensive accounts of their experience working with young people following the bushfires.

The study’s respondents were available locally within the bushfire communities, and were willing and able to participate in the study. Participants were approached to take part in the study via email and phone, with all the study’s respondents being given relevant information on the study, outlining the details of the research and what their participation would entail. All interviewees were provided with the plain language statement related to the study (see Appendix C), and every participant signed a consent form before taking part.

3.1.2 Sample

The respondents came from different employment sectors including local government, community service organisations, bushfire-specific support services, youth support centres and local schools. Their professional backgrounds were varied, as shown in Table 1. Of the 10 professionals who participated in the study, nine were female and one was male.
Table 1 Respondents’ professional backgrounds

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Background</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community youth worker</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School welfare coordinator</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local council youth worker</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychologist</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bushfire recovery program manager</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional counsellor</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The ages of the respondents ranged between 20 and 50 years, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Respondents’ ages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20-30 years of age</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-40 years of age</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-50 years of age</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51-60 years of age</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.1.3 Ethics approval

Ethics approval was given for the research by the relevant ethics board, the University of Melbourne Human Ethics and Advisory Group. One ethical issue identified in the study was the potential for distress to the participants. This was due to the nature of the disaster that had occurred; ethical consideration was given to the possible emotional effects on respondents of recounting their experiences in supporting their clients in the disaster recovery effort. This was especially pertinent where the interviewee had encountered situations following the bushfires that were distressing or traumatic.

From the outset, it was recognised that communities exposed to a disaster tend to be more vulnerable than other research populations (Ferreira et al., 2015). In the case of professionals who had been working with clients recovering from disaster, they have the potential to experience vicarious trauma from indirect exposure to the disaster (Bride, 2004). Due to the small rural nature of many of the communities affected, it was also envisaged that the respondents may also reside within the affected area; this meant that they were exposed to the disaster on a personal as well as a professional level.

To mitigate against this risk to participants, the study provided clear information from the outset on the psychological supports available to respondents if they felt they required them. Participants were also provided with the contact details of the researcher and the research supervisor if they felt the need to discuss the research project for any reason. It was also acknowledged that there was a small risk of participants being distressed by the interview, as the line of questioning from the researcher was focused on addressing the response to young people following the disaster, in contrast to directly focusing on the loss and traumatic experiences encountered during the bushfire.

The participants being known to me was another ethical consideration that had to be contemplated. I had worked on the ground in many of the communities, and was acquainted with many different professionals supporting the bushfire recovery. The main ethical concern was that the respondents would not feel comfortable sharing negative comments about my own organisation; this was accepted as being a limitation of the study.

3.1.4 The semi-structured interview
A semi-structured interview was employed as the method for gathering information from the respondents, and was seen as appropriate for such a sensitive and complex topic. I used a pre-prepared interview schedule, with the same set of questions being administered to all the participants in the study (see Appendix D). I allowed a large degree of flexibility for respondents to talk at length within each question; this enabled participants to discuss at their own discretion the areas they viewed as important to young people’s recovery following the bushfires.

The interview times averaged approximately thirty minutes. The interview questions initially focused on the main support needs the professionals believed that young people had at various stages following the bushfires. The interview then ventured into asking the respondents the services and supports they perceived as being most effective in supporting young people’s recovery following the bushfires. Participants were also asked a series of open-ended questions about how they felt the response to support young people could have been different, including what could be implemented to support young people in any future disaster. The interviews were audio-recorded with the participants’ consent, and they were subsequently transcribed for analysis.

3.1.5 Data analysis

I used thematic analysis to analyse the data I collected. I focused on finding repeated patterns of meaning within the respondent’s answers in the data analysis. Two main steps of thematic analysis were employed to make sense of the data. The initial step that was taken in the analysis was reading through each survey transcript and making sense of the data. Secondly, I examined the collective set of respondents’ answers to understand what was being conveyed by the participants as a group. I performed axial coding to deconstruct data, put them into codes, and find links between the codes (Liampattong, 2012).
Chapter 4: Results

This chapter focuses on the participants’ responses to the study’s two main questions. The first topic covered in the chapter is the nature of the ‘service and community response to support young people’ following the bushfires. Specifically, this section focuses on the service and community response to support young people, as identified by the respondents. This included actions taken by the various entities in the young people’s lives, including families, community members, educational facilities, not for profit services and government agencies. The second topic covered in this chapter is the ‘problems with the response’, which includes the problems that were encountered with the support provided by services and the community as described by participants.

4.1 Service and community response to support young people

4.1.1 Supporting young people within their family unit

Nine of the respondents identified the need for services to have a specific focus on supporting young people’s family relationships. Providing direct support to young people within their family unit was identified as being one of the most effective ways to help young people following the bushfires. Respondents conveyed that providing direct support for the young persons’ family unit was essential, as family was the main source of immediate and ongoing support for many young people.

Participants acknowledged that many families were under a lot of stress following the bushfires. This pressure placed a lot of family relationships under strain, and in many cases it exacerbated the sense of helplessness and isolation that many young people were feeling. Respondents indicated that young people needed to be viewed within the social contexts in which they live, including the family unit, with which the majority of young people they encountered were residing. One participant described this as follows:
And look at the young person themselves, look at their parents and the siblings themselves, look at their family as a whole, including extended family or guardians or foster carers and things that might be also involved. The best work that you do is going to be collaborative with everyone, anyone sort of access on that level as well. (Participant 8)

Participants identified that many families were experiencing conflict frequently and there was a great need to support such families. Five of the participants stated that families who were experiencing conflict within the family home needed support following the disaster. One respondent recounted:

And families or parents specifically there was a lot of stress, a lot of trauma that was going on and there was – I guess just a feeling that parents are really busy, really stressed and that maybe the support that the young people needed wasn’t always coming from their parents. (10)

Participants reported that young people were often not receiving the support that they required from their parents; this was due to their parents having to deal with the immediate needs of the family and the ongoing crisis management following the disaster. Parents often had to organise funerals for deceased relatives or friends, sort through property damage and destruction, arrange finances and personal income, and work through their own grief and trauma, as participants noted:

I think the aftermath of the fires left the adults so traumatised and so focused on the day-to-day needs that the needs of young people was somewhat, they were more about young people keeping quiet for now, look I’m just busy trying to do this, to get a house, get a place to stay. (2)

Participants suggested that professionals working with families and young people should support the family practically, and work through the some of the issues therapeutically. By doing this they can help to find solutions to some of the sources of the conflict within the family home. One respondent said:

I think the clients that I worked with ... were struggling within peer and family relationships. So there was conflict in those relationships as well as elements of
support, but our work initially focused more on the conflict inside of it and you finding a solution to that. (1)

Respondents described instances of family breakdown, in which young people left the family home due to the stress and family conflict that occurred following the bushfires. Participants stated that family support intervention was particularly necessary for young people once they had left the family home and were living in relative isolation from their families. Often these young people were described as having more complex issues, including family violence and drugs and alcohol occurring within the family home. A participant described this as follows:

_For me I would sometimes get the ones that are completely isolated, that their family relationships had broken down or there was violence or some sort of substance abuse and then they weren’t really able to be connected to that family unit that they had before the bushfires._ (4)

Opportunities for families to have a holiday away from the affected area were described as an effective source of support by respondents. In the year following the bushfires, many services provided funding for eligible families to go on a family getaway outside of their local area. Participants acknowledged this as a positive way of supporting young people within their family unit and building family resilience. Many of the holidays provided were for individual families to go away by themselves, refresh, and spend some time together. This gave young people increased access to their parents, who were not as distracted by the stress of the recovery process while they were away. One of the respondents cited:

_One of the things that was considered to be really valuable for the young people in the context of their families was those holidays. Remember that some families could apply and go on holiday in that way, the family can get a bit of break together._ (2)

Some of the holidays involved several affected families in a larger group. In these instances, young people and their families had the opportunity to normalise their experiences around other families. They allowed families to provide support for one another and to share their experiences, as one respondent mentioned.
And then a lot of the young people said that they enjoyed that. So you went away with your family but that’s how they are connected to the young people, maybe they had been affected by the fires. So and you all knew that, you had that same of sort of experience. So it’s less daunting and so the conversations happen more naturally. (6)

4.1.2 Facilitation of a youth space

Six of the professionals interviewed noted that a drop-in youth space located within the bushfire-affected community was a great source of support for young people. The participants stated that the youth space provided support to young people by allowing them to connect with professionals and talk with other young people about their experience. It was described as a place that was largely casual in nature, informal and comfortable; a space where young people could just ‘hang out’, and did not give an impression that they had to talk about their experience or ‘get help’.

Four of the study’s respondents believed that a drop-in youth space was especially needed within the first six months following the disaster. This gave an initial opportunity for young people to process what had occurred with their peers, as the following participant described:

_I think initially one of the main things was providing a space where people could congregate, the initial thing you want to do is provide a space for young people to congregate whether – no matter what they’ve had happen to them, where they can be with other young people and the whole peer stuff. So I believe that the peer stuff was a really strong aspect. (3)_

Participants stated that by having a safe space that they could access freely, young people were able to spend time with other fire-affected young people and provide mutual support. They felt that due to the informal nature of the space, young people could easily be and wanted to be around other young people who understood what they had experienced. They saw this as helpful for young people if they had felt separated from their peers since the disaster. One respondent described the support provided as follows:
I think a safe place where they could talk about what happened to them, that is not always necessarily formally. So it doesn’t necessarily mean counselling or groups, but a place where they could talk at about things at their own pace, yeah, it was the people who would have some concept of what they’re talking about. I know that a lot of young people would say if they talk to friends who were not involved in the bushfires that often they just didn’t get it, because it also separates. With adolescents it separates them from the rest of their peers if they had this experience. And the other kids like some of them went to high schools, maybe with kids that were bushfire affected and yeah. So I think, yeah, being around people that understand where you’re coming from. (6)

Participants stressed the fact that peer support was a major source of strength and support for young people following the disaster. They did this by spending time together, talking about what had occurred and how they were feeling about it, as the following interviewee described:

Yes, peer support was a massive one, which is for young people anyway, that’s just one of their main support networks. Young people were supporting each other. They were talking to each other that about what had happened; how they were feeling, what they are going through. (10)

Youth workers and professionals were often present, and provided professional support to young people who attended the youth space. The support approach taken by the professionals was informal in nature, and focused on letting the young person talk at their own discretion. This was in contrast to the worker initiating a therapeutic conversation about the bushfires, as would be the case in a more formal therapeutic setting. The following respondent described this scenario as follows:

Providing a space for young people to talk about it, but definitely not pushing those conversations, was a really important factor, and not talking openly about the bushfires as a worker. So, allowing our conversation to happen if it came out initiated by the young person but not to be bringing that out as a topic. So I guess that’s basically a safe space really where young people will come together, spend time with each other, be supported by youth workers, but not to have to talk about anything. (10)
Another respondent also described the informal nature of the youth space:

*But I think they needed a listening ear and that would may have been their peers or it may have been workers ... clearly with young people it’s not about, let’s sit down, we’ll have a counselling session or I think I need to go to a counsellor or go and talk to a support worker. It’s more about the casual nature of things and allowing kids to be kids and expressing their own time, what they needed to.* (2)

According to respondents, having professionals present within the youth space can provide the opportunities for young people to ask questions about what had occurred, and understand the event in its proper context. One participant stated that initially young people wanted to know exactly what had happened, and this in turn helped their anxiety levels following the disaster:

*But from what I’ve – I understand from speaking to young people and their families a lot of it initially, immediately, was there some sort of explanation about what was going on and I guess, how do I manage their fears, there’s a lot of anxiety, given what was happening, depending on exactly what their experience was. Sometimes it’s easy to assume that, because we know that the fire is over and the danger is gone, the young person will understand that, but if nobody has told them, their anxiety might still be through the roof.* (8)

Services were also able to provide activities within the youth space. Some respondents spoke of the importance of activities within the youth space so that young people could be occupied while there. The focus of these activities was for the young people to have something to do and provide the opportunity to talk with their peers or professionals as their time at the youth space progressed.

*I think the support needs for young people were, I guess activities for them, things that they could do, not so that they could be actively making a basket, but so that they had a place in which they could if they wished, talk to their peers, or talk to workers, who would be available to them.* (2)

Having an organised youth group running from a youth space was also of great support to one community in particular following the bushfires. One respondent spoke of how vital the youth group was to young people in the community.
I think I guess there was a community-led youth group in the space (which you know about, in Kinglake) which was really popular with local young people. And for the large number of young people who access that service, I think that was really vital to them and was really important and the fact that it was led by local people was I think that was really important. (10)

The youth group was run by locals and was brought together somewhat more formally than the youth drop-in space with regular weekly activities, food and meals provided. The success of the group was also attributed to the group’s links with professional support services.

I think also the influence that professional services had on that space in that group was also really important, so that there was a balance between that local kind of informal network and the professional network that can tap into more specialised services. So that was really important. (10)

According to participants, through these intensive efforts from both community members and professionals, local young people experienced broad and sustained support.

4.1.3 Support through existing community support structures

Five professional participants expressed the view that providing support to existing community support structures was important. Some participants perceived that due to the close-knit nature of these rural communities, existing supports were the most effective at engaging and supporting young people. Some community organisations already had frequent and ongoing contact with young people prior to the bushfires, and had developed a level of rapport within the communities. One respondent described the trust and familiarity that some existing organisations had with young people and their families in the local community as follows:

You have to have a range of different supports, so having supports that are locally based, so familiar faces to the young person or the parents of the community around, it’s hugely beneficial. So, you’re going to get more trust. (8)
Another respondent stated:

*I think they needed support and I think they got it from the schools in and, like the local library and stuff like that, like people that had known for ages.* (7)

Participants conveyed their belief that local community organisations and services that were located within the communities were usually more accessible to young people than the external services that came in following the disaster. These services were often more difficult for young people to access readily, due to being based outside the local area (according to participants). One respondent spoke about this as follows:

*So for me whoever was specifically based in there was the most useful, because there like if you are having a crisis, you are not going to come all the way out to Whittlesea to come and see a service. So I felt that was the most useful.* (4)

The respondent went on to state young people were more likely to engage local services, as they were more readily available, and that this was especially the case in a crisis:

*Yes school – the doctor’s office and stuff like that. That to me was the most useful, because I could access that help from you right then and there as opposed to putting you on an appointment list and hoping you turn up to that appointment. So yeah, that was for me the most useful and resourceful, so I would always seek assistance through those services. In terms of what's going on and what do you have available to help that young person, because like, when you have a crisis you need help right now not tomorrow. So like that was the most useful.* (4)

Some participants expressed the view that many local schools in the affected areas provided young people with considerable support, especially in the form of counselling and pastoral care. Whittlesea Secondary College was provided with locum counsellors by the State Government in the first year following the bushfires, to help support young people within the school community. In the ensuing years following the first year, community organisations provided counsellors when they were not refunded by the State Government. Through having a team of counsellors in the local schools, young
people could engage in counselling when they otherwise would not have, as one respondent stated:

A lot of counselling went on that first year, and yeah so that was the supports that were available, and the kids were able to just say who they wanted to see on the days that the counsellors were available. (9)

The need for outside support for schools was apparent in participants’ answers, and there was disappointment expressed in the removal of funding for counsellors in schools. This was based on the belief that there was still a need for young people to receive support from individual counsellors within the respective schools. One respondent explained this as follows:

Well, young people in school need continuity. I mean that’s why we never closed with anyone until yeah they were done or obviously if they need referral to something else, like Child Mental Health Service, for example, but we still provide support if they required it. But I think that this system now that very specialist support, one day of the week. So if one day of week is Monday, and the young person is in desperate need on Tuesday, they’ve just got to hang for a week. (2)

4.1.4 Youth-specific mental health services

Five of the professionals stated that youth-specific mental health services were needed to support young people following the disaster. Youth mental health services were described as having a specific focus on young people that was responsive to young people’s needs. These services were described as mental health support that was flexible and minimally clinical in nature, with creative and varied responses being used to help young people process what had occurred.

Participants asserted that when there was a youth-specific mental health service in place, young people were more inclined to engage with it. This was in contrast to young people being less inclined to engage if the service was focused more generally on families or the wider community. One respondent said:
The fact there were specific services direct to young people and they weren’t expected to come to mainstream or family or other stuff I think helped. (3)

Another respondent mentioned requests to funding bodies for youth-specific mental health services, and expressed frustration that services such as headspace were not provided:

They may not always have been and there was a lot of push I think the whole time I was there for more specific mental health services. They needed a service like headspace. (10)

A wide variety of youth-specific therapeutic interventions occurred with young people following the bushfires, both one on one and in groups, as one participant described:

Counselling is absolutely fantastic, but different types of therapies meet different people’s needs. We’ve had a horse therapy. We’ve had art therapy – we had bush adventure therapy. (8)

According to participants, through providing different therapeutic interventions, services were able to support a wider base of young people. This included young people with more serious mental health challenges as well as those who needed needed less clinical support.

So some of the same young people that we saw that were presenting then didn’t really need a high-level clinical support, they needed to process their experience in whatever way suited them, so whether that be arts or a different kind of therapy or play therapy, whatever suited them. (5)

One of the respondents talked about a youth-specific therapeutic program that was of great benefit to the young people who participated. The program was run by Operation New Start and was a collaborative effort between Victoria Police, the Victorian Education Department, Whittlesea Secondary College and Diamond Valley College:

‘There was a program that was run by Operation New Start, which we were involved in, which was Victoria Police and the Education Department. Which was run by ***** and ***** and our youth worker ***** was involved in that, and so too was the youth worker at Diamond Valley, _______, and that was like a
recovery project .... So it was a program that was run, I think it might have been in October 2009, and I think it was four of our most severely affected, fire-affected students from our school and the same from Diamond Valley and worked a program around gentle recovery. And that was excellent, and they did really wonderful things, which involved a trip up to Queensland and swimming with the dolphins, and a lots of bush walking and beach adventures and sort of stuff like that, it was very intensive and very therapeutic. (9)

Some participants believed that youth-specific mental health services had the ability to be more visible in the local community, and engage young people more easily, than a mainstream mental health service. They suggested that this was demonstrated by youth mental health services attending community events, where young people became increasingly familiar and comfortable with them. Through these connections, young people were more inclined to engage the service for support. One participant stated:

We did events for mental health week, cooked barbeques at the schools, athletic sports and we brought headspace and other people into those things. So the people could connect. (3)

4.1.5 Flexibility and creativity in service delivery

Participants identified flexibility and creativity in service delivery as a key component in being able to effectively engage with bushfire-affected young people. Four of the respondents explained that both these elements were needed for professionals working individually with young people, and also for engagement in the various group work programs that were run. Respondents described flexibility in service delivery as services listening to local young people and gaining an understanding of what they are interested in pursuing, in contrast to simply imposing a program or activity upon them.

Creativity in service response was described as crafting fun and creative activities that young people are drawn to and want to be a part of, helping to ensure that young people are engaged and connected. Creativity was also described as being responsive to diverseness in the community, and services not having a ‘one size fits all approach’ to the young people that they came in contact with:
So that just make something a bit more diverse I suppose that would be of interest to various people and a range of different types of services so recreation and fun kind of things, yes, as well as like I was saying those social support groups and then also clinical support as well. (10)

Not being rigid with set ideas and being directed by the community’s needs was important to respondents, as the following participant described:

I think organisations are allowed to be flexible ... the work we did at Catholic Care was directed by the needs of the community, instead of having quite rigid and initial ideas about what people should be doing. I think being able to come in from an organisational perspective and just going with the flow of what was all happening on the ground was really important. (1)

Participants stated that young people were able to articulate the things that they wanted, however on many occasions this was not listened to:

But I definitely, the feedback I got from young people was just, we want more things to do, we want places to be able to go after school and on the weekends and we want activities advanced from music, art. (10)

Young people who had been affected by the bushfires but who had not engaged with services for support were of special concern to respondents. This was especially apparent for individual young people who were showing obvious signs of need but were not open to working with the support services available. One participant stated that building familiarity with individual young people was very important for service providers. Trying different creative means to build familiarity was needed, both in individual work and within a group work setting:

And if you see a young person, who seems to be in need, but isn’t engaging, think about what else you can, do you need to go out there and kick a football till they are familiar with you. What do you need to do? (8)
4.1.6 Material aid and financial support needed

Four of the professionals stated that material aid and financial support were important to effectively support young people’s recovery following the disaster. Material aid was seen as especially necessary in the first six months following the bushfires, as they had caused a huge loss of personal property. One interviewee explained:

Yeah, I think at the very beginning it was practical stuff. So they needed [school] uniforms, especially the ones that their houses had burned down, so yeah, really practical stuff, clothes, just like toothbrushes and toothpaste, like really practical stuff. (7)

One of the participants explained that their service was still responding to requests for material aid five years after the bushfires. It was suggested that the financial strain on families had remained, and that this had a direct effect on young people.

So today there was quite a surge in people coming in, because young people don’t have the resources for going back to school, so there is a shortage of the appropriate uniforms, they can’t afford the books, people are in a state of financial strain. (2)

Respondents conveyed that the main goal of providing material aid was to address the basic material needs of young people. This not only helped to meet their basic necessities, but enabled young people to regain some of the lost resources and re-engage in their everyday life and develop a new routine.

So I guess it was just really specific around the isolation, practical support like in basic needs not being addressed or met. So you know getting themselves re-setup so, setup again in terms of just functioning in everyday life. (4)

4.1.7 Social media support for young people

Two of the professionals identified social media as a source of positive support to young people following the disaster. Of special note was one of the respondents indicating that many young people used social media exclusively as a means of support
through the crisis. Through online mediums such as Facebook and Twitter, young people were able to share their experiences with others and provide peer support. One respondent stated:

The number of people that relied solely on their friends, through Facebook, through social media, through getting together with their friends for something that they might have had as a shared experience, and that’s a human trait I think. (3)

Another participant said that she was aware of several young people who found being online helpful in their recovery:

I know some young people who found being online helpful, online community. About various issues whether it was strictly about the bushfires, but when one girl was talking about being suicidal [she] didn’t tell her family or her friends. And it was all because of losing family in the fire, struggling with fires, but she would go online and chat to people. (6)

4.1.8 Role models visiting the community

Two of the participants suggested that having well-known community and national role models visit young people in affected areas had a positive effect on young people. Specifically, they suggested it was able to help boost young people’s morale and encourage them to continue to engage in activities that they enjoy. High-profile cricketers, footballers, and musicians visited young people in the affected areas in the first few months following the bushfires. They gave talks, ran workshops and spent time talking and encouraging young people. Participants stated that young people were encouraged by visiting public figures to continue to pursue their interests, which helped to give them hope for the future.

So I think that was a really important thing that there was some individualised special stuff. So some people still talk about for instance the cricketers that came out or the footballers that came out or the drummer from the Rogue Traders that
came out. One or two guys tell me that’s why they play drums now, because of that sort of thing. (3)

4.2 Problems with the response

This section describes the problems that were encountered with the interventions, as described by the participants. The complications that are discussed include the problems the participants’ own organisations encountered in addressing the needs of young people, and what they witnessed with other organisations and in the community in general. Some of the difficulties included conflicts that occurred between organisations and government departments, cuts to funding, difficulties engaging with communities, and inappropriate support offered to young people.

4.2.1 Organisations took time to understand needs of young people

Rather than having a plan to respond to the needs of young people from the outset of the disaster, there was a period in which information was gathered to better understand how the each organisation could respond. Two of the participants spoke of the extended process it took their organisation to organise their response to young people’s needs following the bushfires. One participant stated that it took them six months to be organised in their response:

And yet, I would probably say that it took us months to get organised, so probably initially it wasn’t quite there, but I would say probably within about six months we started to get more of an understanding of where things needed to be, and how things could be offered to young people. (2)

Participants reported that there was a lot of discussion and at times confusion over what the appropriate response measures should be. This was especially the case when they were made aware of young people who appeared to have significant needs but did not seem to be engaging with the supports available, as one participant reported:
So, there was always a lot of talk, a lot of confusion I think about what the actual needs were and whether young people’s needs are being met. But there were definitely young people identified by teachers, by parents, by family members, by youth workers, who were not getting the services they needed. But I think it might not have been those services weren’t available, or those young people weren’t ready or willing to access them. (10)

4.2.2 Lack of support for students and staff in affected schools

Frustration with the lack of support to school communities was expressed by two of the interviewees. The frustration was directed towards the perceived lack of resources provided to schools to effectively deal with the needs of students following the bushfires, and premature cuts to funding for services that were supporting school communities. External counsellors were funded to attend and provide counselling to students in affected schools for the first year following the bushfires; however, when the funding ran out, many young people were left without counselling while they were still processing what had occurred.

Because I think what worked really well for us was consistency, and stability and we lost that. I suppose we had it for, maybe the first year and half; till the end of 2010. And then after that, the funding all sort of ran out, and once that ran out, I think that’s when things became quite difficult, because it was sort of changing of the guard, and we didn’t have that same staff anymore, and yeah, I think that’s when things started to go a bit wobbly. So, I know you said, sort of the first six months, I think things were good while we had the same stable staff; and kids knew the familiarity of those staff and knew their supports were there and available to them. But when that ceased, I think that became very difficult for our kids. (9)

Respondents noted that once the external counsellors left the school, the continuity of support from individual counsellors that had been a source of stability to the young people was lost. Young people no longer had access to a counsellor any day of the school week, and they were forced to wait until an external counsellor attended the
school on a particular day. However, the counsellors themselves were often rotated on a roster, with no consistency of care for young people.

And the education department is restructured so that the regions for education are massive now, there is far less supports in place for them. We have a structure now in the education department, and this is I guess a step we move from the bushfire work, but we have a structure in the education department now where they are centralising psychologists and other specialist support for young people. And they’re going to rotate them, so they might have a day somewhere, and then a day somewhere else and then a day somewhere else. (2)

One interviewee expressed disappointment towards the Department of Education, which imposed an expensive program upon a school that was subsequently under-utilised. The program was perceived by the school as being a waste of limited money and resources. The disappointment was exacerbated by the earlier cuts to school counselling funding while the students still had an ongoing need. One respondent detailed what took place as follows:

What was disastrous, it was one called the Arise program, which was imposed on us by the department, and it was an idea that sort of came out of, I don’t know where, but all of a sudden, we were told that we were to be involved in it, and it was under the guise of a leadership program, and it was very costly, and I think at one stage, I would be hearing that it was like $180,000 to run this program over a year. (9)

The participant went on to say that the service who was contracted to run the program came from outside the local area, had little local knowledge and did not understand the issues facing the school and young people:

And I think the department funded that with, and had tendered it out; and the tender went to, **** applied for the tender, and they didn’t get it. And the tender was won by, I think it was ****, no it was won by; not it wasn’t ****, it was ****, and it was – no I’ve got nothing against ****, but they just, they were outside of our area, they didn’t know the clientele, they didn’t know the area, they didn’t know anything about us, and the program itself was very vague, and it just was hopeless. (9)
In addition to this there were problems with workers remaining with the program; many left to move onto different roles, creating a lack of continuity for the young people.

In the time that it was running, we had three different people supervising, because everybody kept leaving, the kids were disengaged. I remember at one stage, one of the workers said to me, just bring any kid, just so that we get the numbers, and I said, you can’t do that. You can’t – it’s meant to be directed towards fire-affected students, how can you just to hold any kid, bring in any kid? And they said, oh, it doesn’t matter, we got to have 20 kids in the program. And I just remember thinking, it was so ill thought out, and it made me really angry that they had spent such a huge sum of money without any consultation. And I remember thinking, just give us the ***** and we could do so much more with that. Well we could – we could if we helped our counsellors out and done really good work and support our kids in a lot better ways than just spending it on 20 kids who – we didn’t even have 20 kids, I think we had about 12 kids who weren’t really engaged, because the youth workers who ran it, kept on leaving.

The situation described by the interviewee captures some of the tension that was apparent within some of the communities. This includes the frustration with the perceived inappropriate allocation of scarce resources, which was exacerbated by the loss of funding for programs that were seen being effective in meeting the needs of young people.

The issues that schools were facing were great before the bushfires, and they were exacerbated following the disaster. The feedback given was that teachers were on the frontline helping young people within schools and that they needed more support.

We all know the levels of self-harm, young people committing suicide, particularly boys. And these are real issues for our community and they are becoming more and more common. And I think when we look at things like the additional pressures and challenges to young people who go through whether it’s bushfires or floods or family breakdown, family violence in their home, sexual abuse in their home, drug and alcohol issues within their families or extended families, the pressures on them is so great that we need to have far
more in place for them and for the teachers, because teachers, they get lumped with a lot of things. So I do think that’s a really big issue for us here definitely, definitely. (2)

One participant explained that the sheer volume of young people affected within the school meant that outside support was needed:

And I think when we, I can’t remember the actual stats exactly, but I think when we did the initial survey of our population of about 800 kids at the time, more than 400 had been impacted by the fires. And by that – it meant that they knew somebody who had died in the fires, or that they had experienced it on the day. So that they had either been up there themselves, being caught in it, assisted in the – with the CFA\(^1\), or known a kid who had been, or a family who had been involved in the fires, or who died in the fires. So I think that 40% or 50% of the school’s population who fell into that category. So, we were really very, very affected with 21 or 22 people dying in the fires. So we head into the first year about, I think it was about 2,400 counselling sessions. (9)

Another respondent said:

I think we’ve made, I think there has been an oversight of the school community. I think that the teachers, the professionals within schools in the bushfire areas, overwhelmingly people from bushfire affected areas, I think they bring their own grief and loss in inside and all sorts of other issues and they come to school. ... people are affected by the bushfires themselves and they’re coming to school and we know that there are levels of stress within the school staff that are very high and not really being addressed. And as a consequence of that, young people coming from around the area into that particular, they come with their issues, the teachers have their issues and I really don’t believe there has been enough support, debriefing, counselling within the school context. (2)

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\(^1\) Country Fire Authority
4.2.3 Funding and services for recovery cut too early

Three respondents stated that funding and services initially provided for the bushfire recovery were cut too early, negatively impacting young people.

... funding kept dropping off. So yes, while there were eight other agencies involved, but no in the long run their support dropped off way too quickly. The need there is just as important as it was on day one, and yeah there is reduced number of supports, external supports for them out there now. (1)

While there was an acknowledgement that every area was different, the Whittlesea area was identified as losing vital supports at around the two-year mark following the disaster. Originally many of the supports were located in the one place at the Whittlesea Hub. The Hub was a central place in the community where various organisations were located and people could come and receive referral support and information. One participant stated that with the cuts to funding, the collaboration in service delivery and information sharing between the services was lost as well.

... there was the Hub in Whittlesea, for different communities it would have been different and I’m trying to think from Whittlesea, the Hub lasted maybe two years. I can’t remember, DHS² I think was one of the first organisations to pull out and I think when the Hub went that lost that sense of a place where people could come in and access different supports [was also lost]. And I think from there lots of agencies seemed to lose their funding. The Hub was the place that was created out of a portable building. Following the fires where they – Vibra, DHS, Salvation Army, and Catholic Care – different organisations come and people could come, case managers come and have – there were lots of services and information they could access. (1)

One respondent spoke of loss of trust from young people towards services:

Young people felt letdown by how quickly the support was coming to an end.
Young people struggled to fully engage and trust workers due to their knowledge of when support programs were ending. (4)

² Department of Human Services, Victorian Government
Another respondent stated that this exacerbated the difficulties in engaging with young people as they were not confident in the continuing nature of the support that they would receive:

> So I had handover from people that were doing bushfire recovery, so I picked up a few of those clients and kept those that were from 2009. And they still continued to have the same issues, and it just seemed to be like they needed long-term involvement from a service and that unfortunately was unable to happen, because of funding. So it seemed like all that good work eventually would come to an end and they kind of felt let down by that. So they were already a little bit opposed to somebody else coming in because it was like ‘what’s the point?’ (4).

Concerns were also expressed about the developmental stages of young people and services ending. This focused on young people coming to an age at which they were able to process what had occurred, and were maybe more open to talking with someone and receiving help.

> What I think is more, what I worry about is, because our funding runs to December this year. Sorry, I don’t know that their needs will ever entirely be met, particularly for young people who are continuing to develop. So they may have processed what happened according to the development age that they are at right now, but in two years’ time, their thinking is different. Their brain is growing, but we’re not around to help them, talk it over or ever work through it. (8)

Another respondent stated:

> And really, the kind of young person that’s presenting now with mental health like we’re seeing young people presenting, that we’ve seen before with eating disorders, high anxiety – high anxiety is a huge one; depression and self-harming seem to be huge things for us. And it’s hard to say, because some of these young people saw someone earlier in the piece and are now presenting with more chronic issues. (5)
4.2.4 Service engagement with rural communities

There was a perception from some participants that many services that came in to support the various affected communities had difficulties with engagement. Geographical and social isolation of many rural communities made it much more difficult for outside services to come in and help. According to one respondent, the rural communities affected were not prepared for a more formalised service to support them:

I think the overwhelming thing for me was that rural areas need these services anyway. So when a disaster like that happens, they are so under-resourced to start with and they don’t have, they’re maybe not as used to that more formalised service. So when people – when agencies come in and say, we will help you do this, do that, they’d think like ‘hang on we’ve had this before, we were a bit vary of this’, which is understandable. (10)

Some of the participants expressed that many of the rural communities were significantly under-resourced before the bushfires occurred. This contributed to many of the difficulties encountered in the disaster response, and to a sense of being overwhelmed by the magnitude of the needs present, as the following participant described:

I guess, because like where I was working in Whittlesea, it didn’t have those services, it didn’t have many services available to them, they have to be built up and put in place after that crisis so even at Kinglake services have to come down there. So I felt like that already – you are already chasing your tail after it’s happened whereas it could be implemented before and you are prepared. And you are ready and people should have access to services anyway regardless of there being a crisis or there not being a crisis. So I felt like there would be disadvantage not having that. (4)

Tensions between groups within the community, and professional services coming from outside the community, led to disagreements between the parties. This contributed to some role confusion around how involved outside services should be in certain parts of the recovery effort.
I think there was some tensions in the relationship between the community-led group or groups and professional services at times, and that seem to fluctuate that was my observation and I guess I can only really comment on my organisation and Kildonans’ relationship with that group, and that definitely fluctuated, so at times it was quite solid and it was good and other times there were tensions in it, seemed like maybe we didn’t have such a role to play. (10)

The inevitability of outside services limited tenure within the community was also given ongoing consideration. Due to this, there was a reduction of activity and a gradual handover to community-led services where this was possible. There was an acknowledgement that within this process, there was often tension for services in knowing exactly how to go about this. One respondent described her experience as follows:

So **** was much less active in the Kinglake area towards the end of the three-year period that I was there, and that was partly due to those tensions but not in a way where we thought like we couldn’t be there, but maybe in a way that we felt like that the community really needed to take this on and be the control and to really lead the recovery, the ongoing recovery process so that’s probably difference. I think they needed more professional support at the start and then over time that it became clear what the roles were. (10)

The close proximity of the community members and the fact they all experienced the event together had a bearing on the overall response of the community, with the rural communities becoming even closer through the event.

And we saw because everybody was sort of close to each other in term of living proximity. We saw a ripple effect. Yes, it’s different say for example, if one family has a major tragedy and the neighbours and family within the community who aren’t experiencing that tragedy directly all chip in and help, compared to when one family experiences a tragedy, but so have of all of their neighbours. (8)

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3 Kildonan is a Non for Profit Community Service
4.2.5 Inappropriate offers of counselling to young people

One respondent stated that she witnessed, on several occasions, counselling services being inappropriately set up and offered to young people in community meetings. The participant felt that they were too public, and they caused a sense of embarrassment for some young people if they did reach out for help in such a public setting. The interviewee explained what occurred as follows:

And then one young person said that they had sort of counsellors, designated counsellors in the corner at some of the meetings trying to encourage it particularly for young people to come up and get help. But ... what young person’s going to walk across the room to where everyone knows you’re going over to see someone who is at the counselling? And so in many ways, I think it needed to be something very informal, a way to have helping young people where it’s less formal, like youth groups or something like that or something there were, something that’s a little bit less obvious. And not so daunting to actually pull yourself away. (6)

4.2.6 Different levels of engagement with the community

It was reported that some of the many services that responded were unable to engage with young people in the community and did not manage to make a professional connection with them. According to participants, to be successful at engagement with young people, a level of trust had to be built with the local communities. This most commonly occurred through attending meetings, going to community events and sports training, which provided the opportunity for familiarity and trust to be built between service providers and the community. Some interviewees stated that the community viewed some of the services that were being offered as unnecessary and token. In many cases they were viewed with a level of frustration as they were seen as not providing any real benefit, with the resources potentially being able to be put to better use.

So they were saying, we have all of these mental health services and we have all these counsellors that work with you, and help with grief and loss, but because they didn’t have that buy-in from the community it did not work. So we put a lot
of emphasis in that initial six months and going through all those community
meetings, we would go to football training and cricket training, all that sort of
stuff, and we had the community on our side, so we did a lot of work. (7)

This participant went on to state:

So our boundaries had gotten bigger overnight really. So we needed to build a
lot of trust and that took maybe six months. So, before that we would be going ...
to meetings, a lot of meetings, community meetings out 8, 9 o’clock in the night
just to get our foot in the door with the families and community members, before
they even let us. So, being such a small rural community having no services, to
200 different services, they quickly got rid of the ones that they didn’t want. Or
that they felt were token service support. There was so many of them. (7)

4.2.7 Long-term financial strain on families

Some respondents reported that even five years after the disaster occurred there was still
a lot of financial strain on families. One interviewee stated that at the time of the
interview, they were still supporting a lot of bushfire-affected young people with basic
school supplies, with many not being able to afford to return to school for the new
school year. One participant detailed the material aid and financial support that their
service was providing families five years after the bushfires.

So today there was quite a surge in people coming in, because young people
don’t have the resources for going back to school, so there is a shortage of the
appropriate uniforms, they can’t afford the books, people are still in a state of
financial strain. (2)

Summary

This chapter has presented the results of participants’ views of the service and
community response to support young people following the 2009 Victorian bushfires
and problems that were encountered with the response. The chapter contains service
responses which were identified by respondents as being centrally important to supporting young people following the bushfires.

The first aspect covered in the chapter was ‘the service and community response to support young people’, which focused on the respondents’ perceptions of how young people were supported. The section looked at actions taken by families, community members, educational facilities, not-for-profit services and government agencies.

The second theme covered by the participants was ‘problems with the response’. The section looked at the problems that were encountered with the interventions as described by participants. The areas of difficulty discussed were from within the participants’ own organisations and what they witnessed occurring in other organisations, including the problems they encountered trying to address the needs of young people following the bushfires. Some of the complications described included conflict between organisations and government departments, cuts to funding, difficulties engaging with communities and inappropriate support offered to young people.
Chapter 5: Discussion

In this project I explored professionals’ views of the service and community response to support young people following the February 2009 Victorian bushfires. This chapter brings together the findings presented in the previous chapter, and I discuss these results with reference to the literature. The preceding chapter discussed the main research findings of the study. The findings were presented in two main blocks of results; these were ‘the response from services and the community to support young people’, and ‘problems with the response’.

Foremost, this chapter looks to examine the findings in the preceding chapters in light of the main research question for the study, which is – "what are the professionals’ views of the service and community response to support young people following the 2009 Victorian bushfires?”. The secondary research question that was asked was ‘what were the problems and issues with the response?’

The previously presented findings in the 'service and community response to support young people' section of the preceding chapter, are examined first. The findings relate to:

- support for young people within the family unit;
- facilitation of a youth space;
- support through existing community structures;
- youth-specific mental health services;
- flexibility and creativity in service delivery;
- material aid and financial support;
- social media support; and
- role models visiting the community.

The results presented in the 'problems with the response' section of the previous chapter are examined next. The findings relate to:

- organisations taking time to understand the needs of young people;
• lack of support for students and staff in affected schools;
• funding and services for recovery cut too early;
• service engagement with rural communities;
• inappropriate offers of counselling to young people;
• different levels of service engagement with the community; and
• the long-term financial strain on families.

The findings are examined with respect to the literature outlined in Chapter Two, and in the light of youth and human development research to date.

5.1 What are the professionals’ views of the service and community response to young people following the February 2009 Victorian bushfires?

The main research question sought a better understanding of the views of professionals who supported young people following the bushfires, with a focus on what they thought of the service and community response.

5.1.1 Supporting young people’s families

The participants emphasised the importance of healthy family unit relationships to support young people’s recovery following a disaster. They stated that young people should be viewed through the lens of the social contexts in which they live, with the main social context for many young people being the family unit, where the majority of young people reside. Further to this, respondents believed that services working with young people need to take this into account in their response, and provide direct support to young people and their family unit.

The majority of the professionals interviewed within the study believed that young people were often not receiving the support that they required from their parents. In many instances parents were dealing with immediate and ongoing crisis management,
placing them under a lot of stress and pressure following the bushfires. This pressure put many family relationships under strain, exacerbating the sense of helplessness and isolation that young people can feel.

Rural areas are where the majority of bushfires are located. Respondents stated that it is often impractical for a family to leave the family home and attend a service centre for support, especially in a time of crisis. It was suggested that practical outreach was a productive way to support young people and their families following a disaster. By helping the family with relevant issues, services can help with some of the stress that the young person’s parents or caregivers are experiencing. The help that services can provide through practical outreach includes organising finances, funerals, repairs to damaged property, and respite care for children and young people. Practical support was also identified as including material aid, with services helping families replace the material resources lost in the disaster.

Families having some 'time out' from the disaster-affected area, was identified by participants as important. After the 2009 Victorian bushfires, affected families were supported to take family holidays. Respondents believed this was effective in supporting young people through the increased access they had to their parents during the holiday. This was achieved through the parents being less distracted by the stress of the recovery process and being more available to the young person. Many of the getaways involved groups of affected families; these helped to open up therapeutic conversations about shared experiences encountered during and after the disaster.

The negative effects of a disaster can add to the complexities already being encountered in the adolescent-parent relationship. Supporting this vital relationship makes sense in the context of the developmental changes occurring in many young people’s lives. Many young people are still very reliant on their parents at this stage of development, despite becoming increasingly self-directing and independent (Harms, 2010).

The study’s findings broadly address the programs that support family relationships, specifically the family getaways and the material aid. While the literature mentions family unit relationships primarily in the context of clinical therapeutic interventions that can be used by practitioners, the emphasis on supporting healthy family relationships in the study’s findings corresponds with the review of the literature. For
example, a study focusing on the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina found counselling professionals who worked directly with families provided significant benefits to those families. The counselling work helped to reduce risk factors for young people such as parental stress, family conflict and positive family relationships, subsequently helping to improve the young person’s coping skills (Rowe et al, 2008).

However there are discrepancies between the study’s results and the literature. Some authors went into great detail about the interventions used in the therapeutic work, such as Kilmer and Gil-Rivas (2008), who stated that family work can take on a psycho-education focus with professionals educating parents about supporting the young person’s recovery. This can help the family move towards post-traumatic growth, including supporting the young person’s self-esteem, future vision and direction (Kilmer & Gil-Rivas, 2008). The previously mentioned study by Rowe et al (2008) following Hurricane Katrina also found that multi-dimensional family therapy treatment by counselling professionals was critical for reducing substance abuse and emotional distress.

Pre-existing factors for the young person's family also had an effect on outcomes following the bushfire. Parental marital status, family stability, level of education, the family’s social support network, and the psychological functioning of parents can leave the family vulnerable following a disaster (Davis & Siegel 2000 as cited in Amaya-Jackson & March, 1995).

The literature details how young people look to their parents following a disaster to see how they should respond themselves. If a young person is experiencing their parent’s emotions and behaviour as being ‘out of control’, this will often translate into the young person feeling more helpless and scared. However if the young person’s parents maintain a level of optimism and are able to control their emotions and behaviour, the interactions between a young person and their parents provide support and stability (Baggerly, 2008).

The family unit can provide constant and ongoing therapeutic support for young people following a disaster if the family is communicating well. The literature suggests that families who do not communicate and share their immediate reactions following a
disaster are more likely to have trouble with their long-term adjustment (Solomon & Smith, 1994).

Young people are naturally very reliant on their families when residing at the family home. They are vulnerable to changes in their parents’ situation, including economic, health and social changes that the parents may experience. It can be concluded that if the young person's parents are coping well with the changes that accompany a disaster and limiting the negative impact of the event, the young person will have a greater opportunity to move forward positively as well.

The family can be seen as a form of 'scaffolding' around the young person, both before and after the disaster. If the scaffolding of the family unit is strong, the resources that a young person has to deal with the disaster are increased. The overall aim of the community and services should be to strengthen the family units within the community and respond to the needs and difficulties of families after a disaster.

5.1.2 Support from the young person’s peer relationships

Respondents attested to the benefits of positive peer relationships in the recovery process for young people. They believed there is an opportunity for young people following a disaster to make new connections with other young people who 'understand' what they have been through. They stated that the community and services should help facilitate connections between young people following a disaster. The shared experience of the disaster can be an important bonding factor for young people and an important avenue for support.

This idea is corroborated in the literature on adolescent development, which describes the development of new relationships and significant changes to existing ones as a noteworthy part of the psycho-spiritual changes that occur in adolescence. As they become increasingly mature, young people are often looking to create new intimate relationships outside the family home for the first time in their lives (Harms, 2010).

A 'youth space' or a meeting place that is highly accessible within an affected community was identified in the study as being supportive to young people’s peer
relationships, giving young people an opportunity to engage with others. Participants described the ideal space as casual in nature, informal and comfortable where there is no pressure to attend and all young people feel welcome. Services help to facilitate the process by organising the youth space and having professionals present within the space. The informal nature of the space is important, in that young people can just ‘hang out’, and it does not give the impression that they have to talk about their experience or ‘get help’. Respondents also stated that having an organised youth group running from a youth space was of great support to young people engaging with each other following the bushfires.

The act of entering a new environment in the hope of connecting with other young people can be deemed as an empowering act for an individual young person following a disaster. Through entering a youth space, or engaging with a youth group, the young person is expressing a desire to form new relationships and make a small step towards creating a 'new normal' in their lives, following the loss they have experienced in the disaster.

The literature confirms the need for peer support following a disaster, and its positive effect on their recovery. There is a clear theme in the literature that young people are at a stage in their development where they are very sensitive to peer perceptions and social relationships (DeNigris, 2007). However in contrast to my own study, peer support initiatives are not covered in the disaster recovery literature, there are also no studies of young people supporting one another following a disaster.

As stated, after a disaster young people are in need of extra social support and validation of their experience. However this often does not occur, with many young people withdrawing from their friends and isolating, consequently damaging their relationships (DeNigris, 2007). The friendships of a young person can often be strained if they have had a markedly different experience in the disaster to their peers or their peers have not experienced the disaster (DeNigris, 2007).

Despite young people living in close proximity to one another in the disaster-affected area, it cannot be assumed that they will engage with one another through their own initiative following a disaster. In light of this, it is important that the wider community
and support services make appropriate provisions for affected young people to engage with one another following a disaster.

It could also be concluded that through the formation of new friendships and relationships, young people have considerable opportunity for post-traumatic growth. Due to the strong emphasis that young people place on peer relationships at this stage of their development, the potential benefits of the formation of new friendships with other young people are numerous. This includes exposure to new activities, hobbies, sports, social groups and academic pursuits that they may have not experienced through their existing social networks. In addition to this, the benefit of simply having a friend that understands and can relate to the young person's experience cannot be understated.

5.1.3 Supporting existing local community organisations

The study’s findings ascertained that service providers should attempt to recognise and identify existing support structures, and seek to work with them and support them where they can. Respondents believed that due to the close-knit nature of these rural communities, it was harder for external agencies to enter the community and build rapport independently.

According to respondents, established community organisations were effective in engaging and supporting young people. This was achieved through the trust and familiarity that they had developed over time with young people and their families, prior to the disaster taking place. The organisations mentioned consisted of local schools, youth groups, community organisations, sporting clubs, local council services, local health and medical services, among others.

Respondents stated that geographical factors also played a part in engagement. The local community organisations and services were physically within the communities, and were more easily accessible geographically to young people than the external services that came in following the disaster. These services were often more difficult for young people to access readily due to being based outside the local area.
Local school communities were specifically identified as being a central point of support to young people following a disaster, due to the high proportion of young people they come in contact with in local communities. School resources were stretched thin following the bushfires, with teachers feeling strongly that they needed more support. Respondents believed opportunities existed for external agencies to provide their service and support to the affected school communities.

The reviewed literature supports the study’s findings that schools should be prioritised for support following a disaster, due to the central role they have in the lives of young people. School-based health services have the potential to get the most out of protective factors that cushion youth from some of the negative impact of disasters. School-based services can also support the young person to attend school again, which is a widely acknowledged protective factor signalling a return to normal for youth, families, and other community members (Ager, Stark, Akesson, & Boothby, 2010).

Due to the effect that disasters have on the community as a whole, external agencies can provide support and stability to existing local community organisations. This external support can temporarily assist the social process of a community, including the community’s social system and cultural environment (Prince, 1920).

Many of the staff and members of the existing community organisations lived within the local communities and were directly affected by the bushfires themselves. In taking this into account, external agencies may decide to impose themselves and their services on to a community, in the case they view the entire community as being unable to respond to the disaster. By not taking into account the potential for working with and supporting the existing local organisations with a community, they run the risk of losing engagement opportunities with the local community that they would have otherwise had.

Young people could also be resistant to engaging with service providers due to not having required support before, and as a consequence, they may not feel comfortable working with a professional service. It could be assumed that there would be a greater likelihood of the young person engaging with a service if they are introduced to that service through someone familiar to them. In the case of schools, services could be present within schools following a disaster, working alongside teachers and student
welfare staff, while at the same building familiarity with students within the school environment. The different supports they could potentially provide are numerous; these could include counselling services, therapeutic programs, youth events, and pastoral care for the affected young people.

5.1.4 Mental health services

In the study’s findings, the importance of youth-appropriate mental health services following a disaster was highlighted. Respondents stated that mental health services were more effective when they were responsive to young people’s needs and less clinical in nature. According to participants, when there was a youth-specific mental health service in place, young people were more inclined to engage with mental health services.

Some respondents believed that youth-specific mental health services had the ability to be more visible within the local community, and were able to engage with young people more effectively than mainstream mental health services. Respondents witnessed youth mental health services attending community events following the bushfires, and young people becoming more familiar and comfortable with them.

The current research does not mention youth-specific mental health services following a disaster, however the importance of building good rapport with young people to effectively engage with them is clear. DeNigris (2007) stated that young people are typically averse to any type of professional counselling support, so the professional’s goal should be to build a good rapport with the young person and slowly build a therapeutic and even mentoring relationship.

There was also a parallel between my data and the current research with respect to mental health services using varied approaches to engage with young people following a disaster. Respondents suggested that through providing different therapeutic interventions, services were able to support a wider base of young people. This included young people with more serious mental health challenges as well as those who needed less clinical support. La Greca and Silverman (2009) explained that young people exposed to natural disasters suffer reactions that are often complex and multifaceted and
include a variety of problems, and as a result the professional interventions used must be multifaceted as well.

In recent years Australian federal government funding has been directed into youth-focused mental health services to help with engagement and service delivery to young people. One major program has been headspace, which has a physical presence in many cities and regional centres, and also an online presence. It could be concluded that young people living in rural areas with a small population, such as the majority of those affected by the 2009 Victorian bushfires, would be even less inclined to engage with mental health services than their city counterparts. This would be due to services such as headspace not being present in smaller rural areas, and as a result young people would have been exposed to less discussion and dialogue around the topic.

5.1.5 Flexibility and creativity in service delivery

The respondents asserted that services having some flexibility and creativity in their service delivery was a key component of engaging with bushfire-affected young people. The quality of flexibility was described as services being able to listen to young people and gain an understanding of what they would like, in contrast to services simply imposing a program or activity upon young people.

The term ‘creativity’ was defined as services engaging with young people by crafting fun and creative activities that they are drawn to and want to be a part of. This ensures that young people are engaged and connected with much-needed support. Participants were clear in their responses that they were concerned about young people who did not engage with services, and they felt they needed something creative outside of mainstream service responses.

The literature does not specifically cover flexibility and creativity in service delivery. However, a recent study contained one example of creativity in service response, focusing on a community music therapy project working with a group of young people impacted by bushfires. Twenty-six young people participated over 10 weeks. The group was a creative response from a school and teachers, focusing on young people that showed some risky behaviours following the bushfires. The group was deemed a
success, with young people feeling the group provided some much-needed positivity in their lives (McFerrin & Teggelove, 2011).

One of the main points that can be drawn from these findings is that services should approach young people without preconceived ideas of what should occur, and take the time to listen to young people. This could consist of talking with individual young people, or engaging in a wider consultation within school communities, sports clubs and community groups of which young people are part. It is also important for services to be prepared to respond to young people’s suggestions in new ways. McFerrin and Teggelove’s (2011) music therapy project is a case in point. If for example, young people express a desire to engage in a music group as a way of processing what has occurred, and the service professionals within an organisation do not have any musical experience, the service could look at engaging professional musicians or musicians from within the community to run as part of the group.

Finally it is clear that respondents were concerned for young people who were deemed to require support but did not engage with services at all. It could be deduced that some young people will simply not engage with services no matter what effort is made. Nevertheless, creativity in connecting with difficult-to-engage young people should be at the forefront of service providers’ thinking.

5.1.6 Social media and young people

The respondents described social media as a source of positive support for young people following the disaster. Some reported it being used exclusively as a means of support following the disaster by many young people. Young people can provide peer support by sharing their bushfire experiences through online social media such as Facebook and Twitter.

The literature is supportive of the respondents’ views, stating that social media is seen as a way for young people to share their lives with their friends and acquaintances, and many will have positive experiences (Gabriel, 2014). Adolescents are at a stage of life in which, for the first time, they are developing significant intimate relationships with people outside the family home. Young people’s peer groups take on a greater
significance in their lives and become much more important than they once were (Harms, 2010).

In the aftermath of a disaster, there is also a view from some experts that social media is able to meet the informational needs of people better than traditional media (Van Leuven, 2009). Public health campaigns targeting young people could be an option to improve outcomes for young people following a disaster (Livingstone et al., 2014). This was demonstrated in a study of 438 young people one year after a brief targeted social media campaign, in which improved overall attitudes towards mental health were observed (Livingstone et al., 2014).

In consideration of the increasingly important role that social media has in the lives of young people, services and community organisations could focus on targeted engagement of young people through this avenue. This could be achieved by making young people aware of the social media presence of relevant services that could be of support. Informational campaigns could also be targeted towards young people, making them aware of the status of the recovery effort.

5.1.7 Young people empowered in the recovery

The literature suggests that the involvement of young people in the recovery process following a disaster can be effective in supporting both their own recovery and the recovery of their communities. Young people can be very willing to be involved in the recovery process following a natural disaster, often looking out for opportunities to support their local communities and have an active role in disaster recovery (Anderson, 2005). Higher levels of support provided by young people following a disaster are associated with higher levels of perceived social support and post-traumatic growth (Bokszażanin, 2012).

A study of young people’s post-disaster needs in the Aceh province following the 2005 Boxing Day tsunami recommended that young people be included as an integral part of the community response to a disaster; this includes expanded consultations with young people, community planning, and interviews with key stakeholders. A Polish study indicated that higher levels of support provided by young people following a local flood
were associated with higher levels of perceived social support, a stronger sense of community at school, and greater propensity to engage in proactive coping with stress and experiencing post-traumatic growth following the flood (Bokszazanin, 2012).

Young people supporting the recovery effort following the 2009 Victorian bushfires was not specifically mentioned by respondents in the study. It is unknown whether young people participated or were encouraged to participate in the recovery effort, or if they were consulted by relevant authorities on the recovery effort. Nevertheless, it is possible that the interpersonal interaction that young people have through being involved in the recovery effort would be of benefit in itself. Through the act of helping others they are spending time with other members of the community, and most likely discussing what has occurred in the disaster. Through discussing what has occurred they are further processing some of the informational aspects of the event, as well as potentially receiving emotional support from other community members.

5.2 What were the problems with the response?

The second half of this chapter focuses on the secondary research question of the study: what were the problems with the response? This question was designed to produce a better understanding of any problems in responding to young people’s needs following the bushfires. Respondents detailed the problems with the response by placing them in three main overall categories: problems with engagement and appropriate service delivery, problems within school communities, and resourcing problems. In the results chapter, several problems were identified with the appropriate engagement of young people. These problems raised issues around what the correct response should be for young people following a disaster such as this. Resourcing problems in particular contributed to difficulties supporting the recovery for both services and communities, and this subsequently had a negative effect on some outcomes for young people.
5.2.1 Problems with engagement and appropriate service delivery

The respondents described services encountering many different levels of engagement with young people. They stated that there was confusion and disorganisation with respect to how to engage with young people, especially in the early stages of the bushfire recovery process. This period of time was when many young people were presenting to various services, seeking support for problems they had encountered due to the bushfire.

The confusion and uncertainty centred on the response to the level of need and how to effectively engage with young people. The respondents reported varying levels of success in engagement, with some being unable to connect with young people in the community. They believed that the community viewed some services that were being offered as unnecessary and token, and were viewed with frustration due to not providing any perceived benefit.

No previous studies have focused on difficulties in the service response to young people following a disaster. This is not surprising as the literature focusing on young people and disasters is minimal, with this being even more apparent in an Australian context (Pfefferbaum et al., 2008).

The lack of research on the subject may be associated with the confusion and lack of preparation in the initial response. Lacking any evidence base, it took a long time for services to organise their response. Some respondents stated that it took up to six months to gain a better understanding of the situation and organise a response to support young people.

External services face many challenges when they first enter a rural community. They may have not have much knowledge of the community, and will need to spend some time gaining an understanding of the area they seek to support. This includes getting to know the geographic area in which they will be operating as well as the unique attributes of the community. Each community has different personalities, leaders and organisations that hold influence within the community. It can take time for organisations to acquire this knowledge and make the appropriate linkages to provide adequate support.
It could also be concluded that due to the sudden and unexpected impact of a disaster, many services will not be prepared with the staff or resources to respond adequately straight away. This is especially the case where there is widespread damage and loss of life. It is unknown how often professionals undertake disaster response training within an Australian context, and how prepared social service, health and education professionals are when and if a disaster strikes. It could be assumed that unless professionals had worked within a disaster recovery previously, they would need to take extra time to acclimatise to a unique area of work.

5.2.2 Problems with the responses within school communities

One respondent expressed frustration towards a bushfire recovery program that was seen as being imposed on a school from governmental level. The program encountered a lot of difficulty engaging with bushfire-affected young people in the school. With the funding requirements set, the program would often engage with young people who were not bushfire-affected simply to meet its funding requirements. The service running the program was from outside the area, and according to participants did not understand the culture of the school community; the program was described as being very vague in what it was trying to achieve.

The respondents’ frustration with the ineffective program was increased due to the school counselling program, which was seen as positive, being cut due to funding restraints. Funding for external counsellors was provided to affected schools in the early stage following the bushfires, but when funding ceased, many young people were left without counselling while they still felt it was needed.

The feedback provided by respondents was that not enough support was given to schools directly affected by the bushfires, with many teachers being isolated on the front line and not being given enough support. Respondents stated that many teachers were directly affected by the disaster, and were returning to school highly stressed and not in a position to provide support to students.

The current research confirms that insufficient school-based support fails to cushion young people from the negative effects of a bushfire (Ager, Stark, Akesson, & Boothby,
2010). In a review of the relevant literature, Mutch (2014) found that schools are often the glue that holds a community together through the response and recovery phase of a disaster. Critical to the findings in the current study, Mutch (2014) also found that “as places of pastoral care, they have staff, or can access appropriate personnel, with the skills and knowledge of attending to social, emotional and psychological needs of children, young people and their families in the post-disaster context” (p.19).

5.2.3 Resourcing problems

The respondents stated that resourcing problems for services were a source of difficulty throughout the bushfire recovery. Many of the affected communities were significantly under-resourced before the bushfires for various reasons, with less social service support for the more vulnerable within the community. They believed this was due to the geographical isolation and the relatively low population base of many of the affected rural communities.

My findings showed that services initially provided for the bushfire recovery were cut too early, negatively affecting young people. One area that was identified as being cut too early was the Whittlesea Hub. This was a central place in the community where various organisations were located, and people could come and receive referral support and information. This collaboration between services was seen as vital to supporting the affected community, including young people.

Much of the cooperation between the various services and information sharing was lost due to the funding cuts. Without the sharing of information between services, fewer inter-service referrals were being made, and community members were less able to access vital supports as there was no longer a central access point.

According to respondents, services being cut early exacerbated difficulties in engaging with young people, as they were not confident in the continuing nature of the support that they would receive. Participants were also concerned that the young people would need to process what had occurred in the future when no services were available.
Delivery of services to rural and remote communities is always a challenge. Many professionals would be travelling into the community to provide assistance, and may see their role in the recovery as a short-term one. The different perceptions of what a service is trying to achieve and what constitutes recovery may drive misunderstandings between service personnel and the community at large.

5.3 Strengths and limitations of the study

In the final section of this chapter I explore some of the key strengths and limitations of the study.

5.3.1 The nature of the sample

The study involved interviews with a purposive sample of professionals who had supported the recovery of young people following the February 2009 Victorian bushfires. The study could be seen as limited due to the small sample size of 10 professionals interviewed for the project, whereas a larger sample with professionals from more organisations might have gained greater insights. However, the reason that the study targeted such a small sample was that rather than seeking to gain an 'across the board' view of all professionals within the affected areas, I focused on gaining a descriptive in-depth understanding of certain professionals who worked with young people in the recovery.

Participants were selected specifically because of their work supporting young people in bushfire-affected communities. The recruitment was effective in that it produced a group of participants who were able to provide rich accounts of their experience working with young people following the bushfires. The semi-structured interview approach was able to gather information about a sensitive and complex topic, and provided a large degree of flexibility for participants to discuss topics that they felt were important.
The use of professionals rather than young people can be seen as a limitation of the study as their views were expressed on behalf of young people, not directly from them. In addition to this, the interviewed professionals had varying degrees of professional relationships with young people and their views would have most likely come from the service perspective from which they were working. Examples of this are a school welfare coordinator having a more school-centred perspective, as opposed to a youth trauma counsellor who was working within a therapeutic context. However, this can also be seen as providing the study with more depth by providing a diversity of professional views.

Another limitation of the sample was geography; the study respondents worked with young people located within the Shires of Murrindindi and Nillumbik. The size of these areas meant that the young people could have had significantly different experiences both during and following the bushfires.

A strength of the study was that the professionals interviewed were all involved in direct service delivery with young people, and were able to share their views about the young people they had supported. The varying professional backgrounds and roles of the respondents could also be considered as a strength of the study as it creates a breadth and depth of responses, showing different perspectives of young people’s support needs following the bushfires.

5.3.2 Interviews with professionals

At the time of interviewing the professionals, around five years had passed since the 2009 Victorian bushfires. The questioning centred on what was most effective in supporting young people at different stages of the recovery; this included the initial six-month period following the bushfires and the ongoing recovery effort. Due to the amount of time that had elapsed since the disaster, it was often difficult for the respondents to be clear on the timeline of events. This was especially apparent with respondents who had worked for multiple organisations supporting the recovery and were unable to recall precisely what had occurred. Some of the respondents had started their work a significant period after the bushfires occurred, meaning they were unable to
respond to some of the questions. Interviewing young people five years after the bushfires was also a strength of the study, as participants had had time to make informed decisions about what did and did not help.

The study focused on factors that had supported young people’s recovery since the bushfires and did not seek to ascertain levels of trauma and exposure to the event. Some professionals shared information about these topics (which were outside the scope of the study) but they were still encouraged to express their views. These data are part of the results section and the subsequent discussion. During the interviews, some of the respondents understandably had particularly strong views regarding some of the service responses that they believed did not help young people and were even detrimental in some cases.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

This final chapter presents the overall conclusions of the study. It begins with a reexamination of the overall aims of the research and a discussion of the extent to which they have been achieved. Following this, the implications of the research findings are presented. Finally, the chapter ends with some observations for future research in the field of youth welfare and disasters.

6.1 Revisiting the aims of the research

The overall aim for the study was to understand professionals’ views of the service and community support provided to young people following the February 2009 Victorian bushfires. The secondary aim of the study was to understand the problems with the response that followed. The study was instigated to understand more about the support provided to young people following the February 2009 Victorian bushfires. The disaster caused significant disruption to affected communities, with many people losing family, friends, homes and businesses. Existing research on young people and disasters is scarce, and it is hoped that this research can contribute to appropriate disaster responses for young people in the future.

To address the overall aim of the research, a descriptive understanding was acquired of service provider’s views on the most effective responses to young people’s support needs following the bushfires. Participants highlighted the importance of healthy family unit relationships to assist young people’s recovery following a disaster, stating that services should take this into account in their response, and provide direct support to young people and their family unit. If a young person's family is communicating well, it can provide constant and ongoing therapeutic support for young people following a disaster.

Participants expressed the view that informal meeting places were important for young people to connect with peers and professionals. This was especially helpful for young
people as they were able to connect with their peers and process the shared experience together. Respondents also stated that external services entering the community should support existing community structures, especially local schools, youth groups and community organisations. By providing support, they can help existing structures build their capacity to support their local communities. Other views expressed by service providers addressing the overall research aim included: youth specific mental health services being provided in affected communities; flexibility and creativity in service delivery being prioritised; provision of material aid, financial and social media support; and the benefits of national role models visiting young people in the affected communities.

The secondary aim of the study was realised through the participants providing an understanding of what they viewed as the problems with the response to young people following the bushfires. Many different responses were initiated by different entities; these included local schools, local community organisations, governmental programs, local government youth services, not-for-profit agencies and church groups. Problems identified by respondents included organisations taking a long time to understand the needs of young people; lack of support for students and staff in affected schools; funding and services for recovery cut too early; significant under-resourcing of the communities prior to the bushfires; inappropriate offers of counselling to young people; and the long-term financial strain on families.

6.2 Implications for research

The research

This study adds to the small amount of research that has focused on young people and disasters internationally. Several studies, some of which are ongoing, have focused on the February 2009 Victorian bushfires. It is hoped that this study contributes positively to the knowledge gained from such a significant event in Australia's history, and helps to inform effective responses to support young people in the event of any future disaster. This research has answered the research questions, through producing an understanding professionals’ views of the service and community response to support
young people following the February 2009 Victorian bushfires, and outlining the problems with the response.

Many of the participants were interested in receiving the results of the study; all participants who indicated interest will receive a copy of the final report. Some participants even indicated that there was a therapeutic element to reflecting on the bushfire response during their interview. It is hoped that the participants share a sense of achievement for the contribution they made to the research and to informing future practice.

### 6.3 Implications for practice

Many of the findings of the study have implications for future practice in bushfire and disaster recovery. It is hoped that in any future disaster event, the findings will assist professionals seeking to support young people in their recovery.

An important implication for practice is that services should view the family as a form of scaffolding around the young person. The aim of services and the community should be to strengthen the family units within the community, and respond to the needs and difficulties of families after a disaster. In addition to this, peer-to-peer relationships were identified as being a major source of support for young people, and services should not assume that young people will engage with one another on their own initiative following a disaster. Professionals should work with the wider community and support services and make provisions for affected young people to engage with one another following a disaster.

Another point drawn from the findings is that services should approach young people without preconceived ideas of what should occur in the recovery, and take the time to listen to young people. This may mean talking with individual young people or with small groups, or engaging in a wider consultation within school communities, sports clubs and community groups if which young people are part.

External services entering a community in recovery following a disaster should be sensitive and not impose themselves and their services onto a community which they
are seeking to support. Services should spend time gaining an understanding of the communities they seek to support, taking into account the potential for working with and supporting the existing organisations within a community. Schools are one entity in particular that services could support following a disaster; they can do this by working alongside teachers and student welfare staff, and facilitate the provision of much-needed support services within the school.

Youth-appropriate mental health following a disaster should be a focus for service provision. Young people will be more inclined to engage with mental health services following a disaster if they are oriented towards their needs. Following on from this, as social media takes on an increasingly important role in the lives of young people, services and community organisations could focus on targeted engagement of young people through this avenue. This could be achieved through services making young people aware of the social media presence of relevant services that could provide support. Informational campaigns could be designed for young people, creating awareness of the status of the recovery effort. Finally, services should seek to involve young people in the recovery process following a disaster; this can be effective in supporting both their own recovery and the recovery of their communities.

6.4 The future

Given the small existing body of research into young people and natural disasters and with natural disasters increasing in frequency globally, young people and their communities will continue to be significantly affected. Further research into this area would be of great benefit. In an Australian context, as the major cities extend their boundaries into rural areas to accommodate population growth, more young people will be at risk of being affected by bushfires. Young people have often been a forgotten group following a disaster, but it has been encouraging to see an increasingly specific focus on young people’s wellbeing following the February 2009 Victorian bushfires. I hope that my research will help to bring a greater focus to some of the issues faced by young people following a disaster, and encourage future research projects as well as inform future practice.
References


Appendices
Appendix A

Shire of Nillumbik

The Shire of Nillumbik is a mixture of suburbs that sit within outer northern metropolitan Melbourne and rural localities beyond the urban area. The main suburbs in the Shire are Greensborough, Diamond Creek, Eltham, Hurstbridge, Research and Wattle Glen; the towns and rural localities in the Shire are Christmas Hills, Cottles Bridge, Kangaroo Ground, Kinglake (shared with the Shire of Murrindindi), Panton Hill, St Andrews, Strathewan, Watsons Creek and Yarrambat.
Appendix B

Literature content

When searching through the relevant literature, the following terms were noted in the searches. The term ‘youth’ can be referred to and defined in a variety of different ways. The terms that were searched for in relation to ‘youth’ were as follows:

- Youth
- Young adult
- Adolescent
- Young people
- Teenager/s
- Teen/s
- Juvenile
- High school student/s
- Secondary school student/s

When searching for the key terms, these different terms that ‘youth’ can be identified by in each search were added, however below it is simply stated as ‘youth’. The key search terms that were used to search for in the literature review were as follows:

- Youth trauma
- Youth reactions to natural disasters
- Youth mental health
- Bushfire trauma in youth
- Traumatic event exposure youth
- Traumatology youth
- Traumatology youth counselling
The literature review was conducted by searching electronic databases for quality peer-reviewed journal articles; the main databases that were searched were as follows:

- Melbourne University EBSCOhost Discovery Service
- Google Scholar
- Web of Knowledge
- Scopus
- Libraries of Australia
- ASSIA (CSA)
- ATSI Health (Informit)
- Australian Public Affairs Full Text (Informit)
- Humanities and Social Sciences (Informit)
- Informaworld
- International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (CSA)
- Science Direct
- Social Services Abstracts (CSA)
Appendix C

Plain Language Statement

Who is conducting this project?

Thank you for taking an interest in participating in this research project, which is being conducted by Student Researcher Mr Aaron Bingham under the supervision of Dr David Rose and A/Prof Louise Harms of the Department of Social Work at The University of Melbourne. The title of the research project is 'Young Peoples' perceptions of support needs following the 2009 Victorian Black Saturday Bushfires’. This research will form part of Mr Bingham’s Master of Advanced Social Work thesis.

What is this project about?

The aim of this research is to better understand the factors that supported young people following the Black Saturday Bushfires, so that better responses to young people’s needs can be made following possible future natural disasters. Should you agree to participate you would be asked to undertake an interview that will take approximately 30 minutes depending on your responses. The questions are focused on the way you saw young people’s needs following the Black Saturday Bushfires, the support they received, what help they received and what you believe their ongoing needs were and are.

What am I being asked to do?

You will be asked to describe and discuss your answers during the interview, giving your own opinion developed through you're on the ground direct experience working with young people who were affected by the Bushfires.

Will my identity be kept confidential?


All effort to keep your identity hidden will be made, and any references to personal information that might allow someone to guess your identity will be removed; however, you should note that as the number of people participating in the interviews is small, it is possible that someone may still be able to identify you.

**Will I be able to view the results once the research is complete?**

Once the thesis from this research has been completed, a summary will be available for you to view the results online; you will be made aware of the web address, via email once the research is completed. It is also possible that the results will be presented at academic conferences and published in academic journals. The data will be kept securely in the Department of Social Work for five years from the date of publication, before being destroyed.

**Can I withdraw from the project at any stage?**

Please be advised that your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Should you wish to withdraw at any stage, you are free to do so without any issue. By signing the consent form at the start of the interview you are consenting to taking part in the study. Links to support services will be provided as needed.

**Who can I contact if I require further information or have concerns?**

Should you require any further information, or have any concerns, please do not hesitate to contact either the research supervisors; Dr David Rose on 03 8344 9423 or drose@unimelb.edu.au and A/Prof Louise Harms on 03 8344 9413 or louisekh@unimelb.edu.au. Should you have any concerns about the conduct of the project, you are welcome to contact the Executive Officer, Human Research Ethics, The University of Melbourne, on ph: 03 8344 2073, or fax: 03 9347 6739. Ethics approval granted through University of Melbourne Ethics Committee No 1137027.
Appendix D

Interview schedule

• What role did you perform in supporting young people following the 2009 Victorian Bushfires?

• What do you believe were the main support needs for young people in the first six months following the bushfires?

• What do you believe were the main continuing and ongoing support needs for young people following the bushfires?

• In what ways, if any, did you witness young people’s personal network of family, friends and community contacts supporting them following the bushfires?

• What professional or professional services do you believe were of the most support to young people immediately following the bushfires?

• What professional or professional services do you believe were of the most support to young people continually and ongoing following the bushfires?

• Overall do you believe that the young people that you came in contact with following the bushfires received adequate support?

• Based on your experience what do you think would be the ideal support for young people if a disaster like this happened again?

• Is there anything else you would like to add to the factors that supported young people following the bushfires?
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Author/s:
Bingham, Aaron Ross

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Supporting young people following the February 2009 Victorian bushfires: The views of professionals

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