



SURVEY RESULTS

SUMMARY OF RESULTS FROM NATIONAL STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF CLIMATE-FUELLED DISASTERS ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF AUSTRALIANS



**CLIMATE
COUNCIL**



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Blue**

Australians are facing increasingly severe and frequent extreme weather disasters driven by climate change. In December 2022, Climate Council, supported by Beyond Blue, undertook an extensive two-part national study designed to better understand the impact of climate-fuelled disasters on mental health in Australia, and how best to support the wellbeing, recovery and resilience of communities.

The first part of this study was a poll conducted by YouGov with a representative national sample of 2,032 Australians.¹ The second part, conducted in parallel and hereafter referred to as the “community survey”, sought to gain some deeper insights from those in disaster-affected communities, and saw 476 self-selected Australians share their personal experience of climate-fuelled disasters.²

This paper provides a snapshot of some of the most significant findings from both of these surveys.

A full report with detailed analysis of the results, case studies, and full recommendations, will be published on 28 February 2023.

¹Poll conducted from 2-16 December 2022. The sample covered Australians aged over 18 including representatives of different genders, generations, geographies (states, city/rural, etc.), education levels, income levels, voting habits, and other characteristics. The theoretical margin of error on a sample of 2,032 is $\pm 2.5\%$. The methodology statement can be accessed here: <https://au.yougov.com/results/apc>

²From 1-16 December, in parallel with the national survey, the Climate Council and Beyond Blue invited Australians to share their experiences of climate-fuelled disasters. This was by way of an online survey, advertised through our respective networks. The survey asked respondents about the type of disasters they had experienced; the kinds of impacts they had felt, including impacts on their mental health; their experience with mental health support; impacts on their properties; and their concerns for the current summer. The survey included both multiple choice questions and free text responses. Unlike the first survey, which involved a national and representative sample of Australians, this second survey relied on people coming forward voluntarily to share their experiences. It should therefore be taken as indicative only.

How many Australians have experienced an extreme weather event? What kind, and how often?

From the national YouGov poll

The majority (80%) of Australians reported experiencing some form of disaster at least once since 2019, of which 63% said heatwaves, 47% flooding, 42% bushfires, 36% drought, 29% destructive storms, and 8% landslides.

People living in rural and regional areas are significantly more likely to have experienced flooding at least once since 2019 (61%) than people living in urban areas (38%). Similarly, country residents were more likely to have been affected by a bushfire at least once (49%) than people in urban areas (36%).

People in Queensland and New South Wales are the most likely to have experienced multiple disasters since 2019. Specifically, 38% of Queenslanders and 34% of people in New South Wales reported experiencing flooding more than once since 2019 (compared to 13% in Victoria, 5% in Western Australia, 4% in South Australia, and national average of 24%.)



Worries about climate change and extreme weather events in Australia

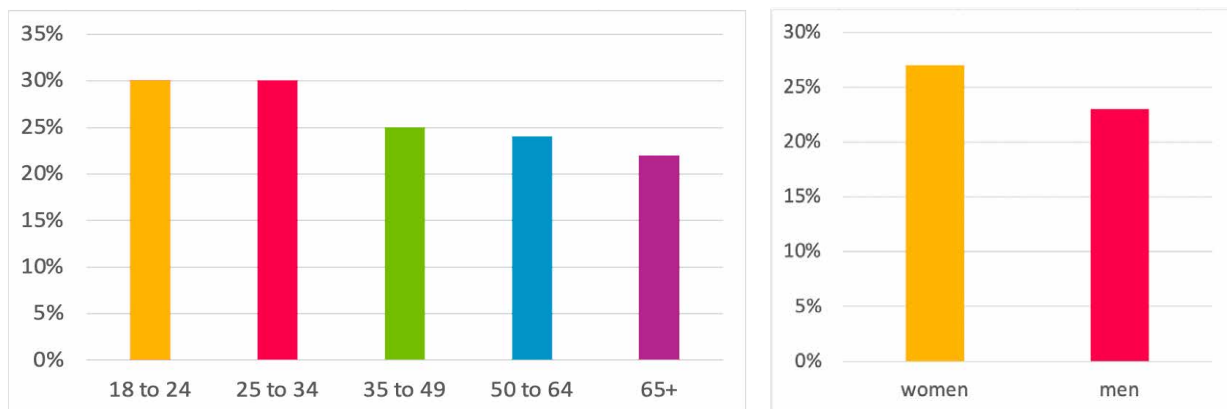
From the national YouGov poll

More than half (51%) of Australians surveyed are “very (25%) or fairly worried (26%)” about climate change and extreme weather events in Australia.

Around two in five (42%) are “very or fairly worried” about their community facing further disasters during the current summer.

People who are “very worried” about climate change and extreme weather events in Australia are more likely to be women (27%, compared to 23% for men), and to be younger (30% for those aged 18 – 34, compared to 22% for those aged 65+).

Percentage of Australians who are very worried about climate change and extreme weather events



From the community survey

Not surprisingly, level of worry about the current summer was higher among our group of 476 Australians who identified themselves as having recently experienced a climate-fuelled disaster:

- › More than half (57%) said they were either “very or extremely worried”. Only 6% said they were not worried.
- › When asked if they felt prepared for another disaster, 25% said they felt either unprepared or completely unprepared. Only 11% said they felt prepared.

SELECTED COMMENTS

"The thought of more flood-inducing weather makes me want to be sick. If any communities in the Northern Rivers are impacted by flooding yet again I think it will decimate community life and many residents will completely give up and leave the area for ever."

- Clunes, New South Wales

"I literally dislocated my jaw with stress last year (clenching). With another dramatic summer upcoming, my body is in constant physical pain again."

- *Blackheath, New South Wales*

"It honestly feels like you can't relax. It's hard to plan the garden around this strange weather. None of the normal seasonal things seem to apply. Everything is out of whack. Forever bracing for the next event."

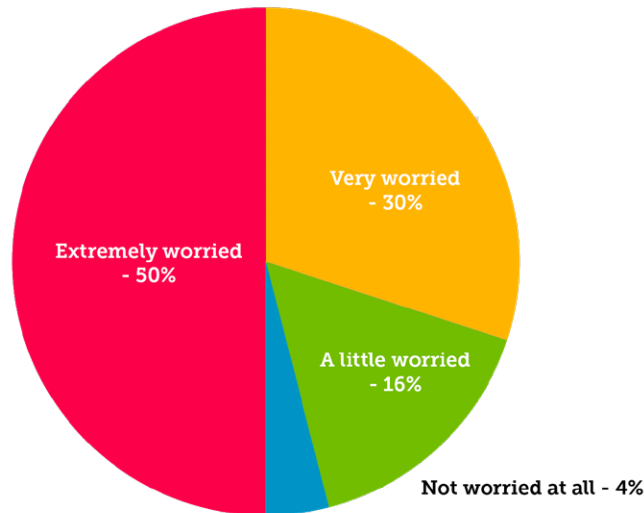
- Shepparton, Victoria

"I am worried, not because flooding is such a risk here, but because so many others are under threat and people who have already undergone huge trauma from flooding cannot possibly maintain their mental and physical well-being. I am also very worried because the government response to this impending and continuing disaster that is climate change is just too lumberingly slow and ineffectual."

- Eurobodalla, New South Wales

Asked more generally about climate change driving more severe and more frequent disasters, half (50%) said they were extremely worried about this. 96% responded that they were either “a little”, “very”, or “extremely” worried, leaving only 4% “not worried at all”.

Do you feel worried or anxious about climate change driving more frequent disasters?



SELECTED COMMENTS

"It keeps me up at night. I feel helpless."

- Port Macquarie, New South Wales

"My children are scared for their future, they most likely won't have children of their own, as they don't feel it is a safe place any more."

- Castle Hill, New South Wales

"My family are considering moving because of climate change impacts on our area. We are worried for the future our daughter will inherit."

- Brisbane, Queensland

Impacts of climate-fuelled disasters on mental health

From the national YouGov poll

More than half (51%) of Australians who experienced climate-fuelled disasters since 2019 say their mental health has been somewhat impacted, of which one-in-five (21%) claim that the disaster they went through has had a "major or moderate impact" on their mental health.

From the community survey

The variety of impacts reported by those who have experienced a climate-fuelled disaster included:

- › 57% experienced feelings of helplessness and despair
- › 57% were worried about the safety of their family
- › 51% were worried about their personal safety
- › 44% reported loss of community facilities and services
- › 27% were separated from loved ones
- › 25% experienced disruption to their employment
- › 11% experienced loss of livelihood
- › 7% experienced a physical injury.

SELECTED COMMENTS

"We knew the storms would be bad in February 2022, but we didn't realise how bad. We couldn't get the cattle up in time, and worried about vulnerable family and friends we couldn't reach when communications went down. We had issues with a medically fragile child and could not access medical help if needed, so that was an additional stress. In the immediate aftermath, getting access to essential resources to food and water was a concern; it took days to get access to essential resources to shops, and then there were limits on what we could buy, which was a challenge when we had 8 people in our home (I understand why the limits were in place). The clean up was a mammoth job and there were concerns about health."

- Ballina, New South Wales

"Loss of home and family pets. Almost drowned. Water rose to 2m OVER the roof of my raised home in North Lismore. My life has completely changed, my son and I are still displaced with no hope in sight for what our future will become."

- Lismore, New South Wales

"During the Lismore and Northern Rivers floods of March 2022, I was initially in shock and horror. People were scrambling for their lives, or trapped in their homes or on roofs. They were relying on volunteers, people just like themselves to rescue them. The aftermath involved grief and sadness. Sadness for the people who had lost loved ones and had their lives turned upside down or just washed away."

- Alstonville, New South Wales

Looking specifically at mental health impacts reported in the community survey:³

- › 22% of respondents reported a "major impact" upon their mental health, while 65% reported a "moderate or minor" impact.
- › The leading impact was anxiety symptoms (73%) followed by depression symptoms (49%).
- › More than half (56%) of respondents experienced sleep disruption and 30% experienced symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).
- › One in four (25%) said their experience of the disaster had exacerbated an existing mental health problem.
- › 15% reported a negative impact on relationships and 10% reported alcohol problems.

Many respondents also shared details of the toll that the disaster(s) had taken on their children, with almost half (45%) saying that their child had experienced mental health concerns as a result of the disaster(s).

Important note: If your child or children need support, please contact Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800 or your local GP. Excellent resources about helping children after a disaster are available at [Emerging Minds](#).

³Self-report of symptoms based on response to the question "Which of these (one or more) best describe how the disaster has impacted on your mental health?" with response options such as anxiety symptoms, depression symptoms, post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms. Note that they are not clinical diagnoses rates based on psychometric scale testing.

SELECTED COMMENTS

"One of my son's has developed a sleep disorder and is depressed."

- Gunning, New South Wales

"[My children experienced] depression, hopelessness... gave up on VCE and clubs for the older [child]; exacerbated suicidality for the younger [child] right at the time demand overwhelmed availability of help."

- Melbourne, Victoria

"Our middle child has a diagnosis of ASD-Level 2 and Anxiety. The storm and its aftermath significantly heightened his anxiety to the point of meltdowns, sleep disruptions and a stress reaction to any rain events."

- Ballina, New South Wales



Provision of mental health support following disasters

From the national YouGov poll

Among those who have experienced at least one climate-fuelled disaster since 2019, more than a third (37%) said there was too little mental health support available for people in the community after the disaster. A similar proportion (36%) said there was just enough support, while only 3% said there was too much support.

The number of people saying there was too little support varied slightly between states: Around four in ten in New South Wales (41%) and Victoria (39%), and around a third in South Australia (34%), Queensland (32%) and Western Australia (28%).

People living in provincial and rural areas are more likely to say there is too little mental health support following a disaster (41%), compared to those residing in inner and outer metropolitan areas (33%).

From the community survey

Our detailed qualitative survey with people who had recently experienced a disaster provided further insights into Australians' experience of mental health support following a disaster:

- › When asked what mental health support they received, almost 30% said they turned to their GP for support. 13% received support from a counselor and 23% spoke to a psychologist. 45% said they didn't seek out formal mental health support, though many received informal support from friends and family.
- › Almost half of respondents (45%) said mental health support was accessible "with some effort" and two in five (40%) said it was "quite or extremely difficult" to access. Only 3% said it was impossible to access.

SELECTED COMMENTS

"I already had support from my GP and from a psychologist before the floods and continued to work with them – I am very grateful for their support, and the support of so many family and friends, throughout. I'm not sure that people who are not living in environments like this understand the ongoing sadness associated with empty houses and dislocated families."

- Fairfield, Queensland

"I haven't bothered seeking any mental help. It's almost impossible to see a good doctor in rural Victoria. What hope would there be for mental health?"

- Budgerie, Victoria

"Just talking openly and honestly to the people in our village helps so much. You know you are NOT alone."

- Bundanoon, New South Wales

"I'm actively involved in grassroots community action. Being surrounded by like minded positive people who want to make a difference is the best tonic."

- Melbourne, Victoria

In their own words: What support do individuals and communities need?

Many respondents to our qualitative survey of Australians who have experienced a climate-fuelled disaster provided thoughts on what they and their communities most needed. The following are a small number of extracts from the many responses received. More details will be shared in the full report, to be published on 28 February 2023.

Personally, what support do you need most right now?

"Mental support and advice on how to be better prepared as well as reassurance from the Government that they are aware and ready to help."

- Kallista, Victoria

"The thing I and most people I speak to is an assurance that as much as possible is being done to prevent or at least minimise these weather disasters."

- Broulee, New South Wales

"I need to see the govt taking real action to address the causes of climate change. Without this there is no hope and mental health will decline further whether you're directly impacted or not."

- Townsville, Queensland

"A lot of the fear is from seeing the future being worse because we're STILL using fossil fuels, and still getting them out of the ground in spite of community outcry."

- Darwin, Northern Territory

"Just a break from disasters. Some quiet time to regenerate and have some normality. Seeing the recent disasters at Eugowra and Forbes in the central west was upsetting and a shock as I really felt for what those people were going through."

- Alstonville, New South Wales

"...the support we need is the support we all need, urgent action to mitigate the extreme weather events and other disruptions we know we will all endure thanks to the levels of climate change already locked in, and decisive policy to stem any further levels of change, in terms of reducing emissions, now."

- Fairfield, Queensland



What support does your community need?

"We were trying to recover from the drought when we have been hit with I think 5 floods this year. Farmers on the floodplain are despondent and distressed about losing so many crops. Many people need talks to aid their mental health and Government to come up with plans to restore river bank erosion etc"

- Singleton, New South Wales

"Youth mental risk really scares me. We have lost too many young people in our community from self harm and depression. It may be multiple factors but they deserve to look forward to a full joyful life."

- Alstonville, New South Wales

"Everyone needs an army of trades and services."

- Buxton, New South Wales

"We live south of Lismore in a rural setting and the whole community there is truly struggling...stagnant and lost. There is a huge sense of loss and despair... loss of dreams as well as of things ...a loss of purpose. Early adopters of alternative living, solar powered and sustainable these folk are now in the 60s and 70s and having to start all over. We need an energised work force of tradies dedicated to seeing us through ...we have some funds and funding but limited long term answers."

- Lismore, New South Wales

"Significant mental health support, and also relief support for the mental health workers in the area. Local residents still feel like they haven't been heard, they feel helpless."

- Clunes, New South Wales

"A lot. Families have lost their entire homes and the ability of them to rebuild back from this quickly is near impossible. The amount of upset and trauma is unmeasurable, and most concerning, just the tip of the iceberg."

- Melbourne, Victoria

Climate Council and Beyond Blue express their deepest gratitude to the hundreds of individuals who kindly and courageously contributed their stories, experiences and insights to this study.

IMAGE CREDITS

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Page 8: 'My sons school' in Lismore, March 2022, licensed via Cassandra Scott-Finn.

Page 12: People with their arms around eachother for support, by Vonecia Carswell , licensed via Unsplash.


The Climate Council is an independent, crowd-funded organisation providing quality information on climate change to the Australian public.

The Climate Council acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we live, meet and work. We wish to pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging and recognise the continuous connection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to Country.

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 twitter.com/climatecouncil

 info@climatecouncil.org.au

 climatecouncil.org.au