

Community perceptions of the effectiveness of community rebuilding activities Research Summary

December 2019

Analysis aims

The purpose of this analysis is to explore community perceptions of the effectiveness of community rebuilding activities. This work extends the previous analysis released in May this year looking at the community perceptions of the impacts of the event and the effectiveness of communication during and after the event.

Meet the Team

Dr Susan Yell
Assoc Prof Michelle Duffy
Dr Sue Whyte
Dr Larissa Walker
Dr Matthew Carroll
Prof Judi Walker

The Community Wellbeing Stream is led by Federation University. The HHS is led by Monash University with collaborators from Federation University, the University of Tasmania, the University of Adelaide, the University of Newcastle and CSIRO.

The research was funded by the Department of Health and Human Services.



Background

The fire in the Morwell open cut brown coal mine adjacent to the Hazelwood Power Station blanketed the town of Morwell and the surrounding area in smoke and ash for six weeks in February and March 2014. The smoke event was recognised as one of the most significant air quality incidents in Victoria's history. It caused considerable community concern within Morwell and the broader community. In response to these concerns, and following extensive community consultation, the Hazelwood Health Study was established to examine the impacts of the mine fire. The HHS involves multiple research streams targeting different health outcomes and different vulnerable groups.

The **Community Wellbeing Stream** is the part of the Hazelwood Health Study that looks at the impact of the smoke event on the community wellbeing of those living in Morwell and the Latrobe Valley. This includes looking at the communication during and after the mine fire, and at the community rebuilding efforts that have taken place since the fire.



What we did

We held group discussions with community members and interviewed people from community organisations and agencies involved in the emergency response and recovery, local journalists and social media users. We also collected media articles about the mine fire, along with social media posts by community members on three local Facebook groups. We interviewed a total of 85 people, and analysed 1,096 media reports and 1,709 social media posts. We partnered with community members to produce a photographic exhibition which expressed their aspirations for the future.

What we found

A range of recovery initiatives were undertaken by various agencies, but not all the work that was done was recognised or valued by the community. Effective recovery initiatives involved a partnership between agency and community, and open dialogic communication. The distinctive characteristics of this community require a place-based approach to the recovery process.

Three years after the mine fire and smoke event, there were still community concerns regarding the apparent lack of planning for a similar future emergency. Stakeholders identified a need for clear and distinct strategies for managing the recovery phase, and for transitioning from the emergency phase to the recovery phase.

The question of 'recovery to what' was very important to this community, as was the development of a long-term vision. The community's focus on recovery shifted over the 3-year period (2014-2017) from a primary concern with physical health, to include a range of concerns: broader wellbeing, job creation and sustainability, and the implications of a transition from coal.

This volume of work is intended to be read in conjunction with the earlier work on the impacts of the event released in May 2019.

Copies of both reports describing the full findings from these analyses can be found at www.hazelwoodhealthstudy.org.au/study-reports



Considerations

The findings of this study would be useful for policy and planning for future disasters. Stakeholders noted the challenges needed in developing an appropriate emergency plan, and that it would require significant resources and financial support.

The community used different communication spaces to communicate and receive information at different times during the recovery period, and this knowledge can be used to inform future emergency planning. Effective rebuilding and recovery should involve collaborative community-led approaches and partnerships.

While every attempt was made to speak to a broad array of individuals and organisations, it is possible that the participant sample may not represent the full range of viewpoints. However, the analysis of media and social media broadened the range of potential viewpoints.

Where to from here?

Additional data collection is planned to track the ongoing wellbeing of the community.