

# Domestic violence soars after natural disasters—prevention needs to be part of the emergency response

January 27 2021, by Jennifer Boddy and Celeste Harris

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[Domestic and family violence](#) soars in the months and years following natural disasters. It usually involves [physical and psychological violence](#)

perpetrated by men against women and children, but it can also include an escalation in sexual, financial and emotional abuse.

Following the 2009 Victorian Black Saturday bushfires, more than half of women in [one study](#) reported experiencing domestic and [family violence](#). Many had never experienced it before.

[Recent research](#) found significant differences in reports of [violence](#) amongst women in high, medium and low bushfire affected regions in Victoria three years after the Black Saturday bushfires. There was an overrepresentation of women experiencing violence in high bushfire affected areas.

And according to Australian frontline workers, while reports of violence might decrease during a disaster, it soon [escalates](#).

Australia is not alone. Overseas literature suggests demand for [women's shelters goes up](#) after [disasters](#), [police reports of violence increase](#), and violence [remains elevated even years after disasters](#), with women experiencing [significant psychological and physical abuse](#).

## Disasters and violence

Disasters are becoming more [frequent](#), with an [average of about 200 million people](#) affected globally each year.

Natural disasters on their own are not the root cause of family violence. Many men feel [society expects them to live up to](#) characteristics commonly associated with masculinity. For many, their [identity as "providers and protectors" is threatened](#) when disaster makes this an impossible standard to meet.

The frequency and severity of violence against women is exacerbated by

tensions arising from [natural disasters](#), including:

- [displacement](#)
- [unemployment](#)
- [increased alcohol and drug use](#)
- [trauma](#)
- [grief and loss](#).

## **Disasters hit vulnerable groups hardest, entrenching disadvantage**

Disasters can have disproportionate effects across socioeconomic groups. We have known for some time disasters of similar nature and magnitude have dramatically [different consequences](#) for people in different places.

Families where income has [fallen after a disaster](#) are at higher risk of women experiencing violence.

The [2016 Personal Safety Survey](#) found both financial stress and unemployment were associated with women experiencing domestic and family violence.

Worse, [research](#) shows disasters are more likely to occur in low socioeconomic areas.

In Australia, about [one quarter of women](#) have experienced an incident of violence from an intimate partner.

## **Violence prevention should be part of our emergency response**

As disasters are expected to increase, Australia should further consider how to incorporate domestic violence mitigation into our emergency responses.

First responders need training in how to identify risks of violence and respond appropriately.

In the face of displacement and trauma, it's important volunteers and workers do not excuse violence. Instead, they should provide care that promotes victims' safety, and respects their privacy and dignity. Access and referral to appropriate health and [community services](#) should be assured.

We need permanent shelters that stay cool during heatwaves and offer protection from flooding. Public buildings need to be well set up for women and children experiencing disasters and, during COVID-19, allow for families to maintain a safe physical distance.

Local community-based domestic and family violence services must ensure their organizations are disaster-ready and can operate when disaster strikes.

## **Longer term investment to boost community resilience**

Australian governments must invest in domestic violence hotlines, refuges and women's centers—especially in low socioeconomic, disaster-prone areas.

Programs supporting perpetrators of violence to change their behaviors also need investment.

Australia currently relies on [perpetrator intervention programs](#) involving therapeutic groupwork as part of what's called an "[integrated service system response](#)" (where government, non-government services and other community organizations coordinate).

But we also need new ways of working directly with men, informed by the experiences of women. Such approaches should seek to intervene early and involve women and children in their design.

As a society we must seek to address the underlying causes of domestic and family violence, and move beyond outdated ideas about masculinity that hold men to an impossible standard and put [women](#) at risk.

Many people don't actually know what domestic violence looks like. We need community education about coercive and controlling behaviors and about the fact that the risk of family violence spikes after disasters.

Such training should be used to challenge social and cultural norms that condone violence, while also letting people know how to report violence, find services, and get to safety.

We all have a role to play in addressing domestic and [family](#) violence. Our efforts grow only more important as we face more frequent and severe disasters in Australia.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Domestic violence soars after natural disasters—prevention needs to be part of the emergency response (2021, January 27) retrieved 23 June 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2021-01-domestic-violence-soars-natural-disastersprevention.html>

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