

The lived experience of four disasters – insights into community urban resilience experiences

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There is currently little information on how communities experience disasters beyond the costs of immediate insurance claims. This means the long term psychological, social and financial impacts borne by individuals and communities are unquantified and invisible. Research undertaken by Resilient Sydney and the Sydney Environment Institute sought to rectify this. Our research outcomes address the themes of connection and wisdom within the 2019 Australian Disaster Resilience Conference.

The ‘Insights into Community Urban Resilience Experiences’ research project examined community resilience to shock events in Metropolitan Sydney. The project highlighted that the lived experiences of residents and service providers to shock events is largely absent from resilience research, policy and practice. The project focused on how these experiences can inform initiatives that minimise household and neighbourhood disruption, trauma and suffering. It made recommendations for policy, program, and resourcing interventions to efficiently and effectively limit the impacts of future shock events and reduce human suffering.

This study used focus groups and the System Effects methodology to identify the impacts, barriers and enablers experienced by residents and emergency and non-emergency service providers in relation to 2013 Blue Mountains bushfires, the 2016 East Coast Low in the Northern Beaches, the 2016/17 heatwave in Penrith, and the 2014 Martin Place Siege.

Our findings support calls for policy development that acknowledges the wisdom and lived experiences of a wide range of stakeholders via community engagement. It identifies the System Effects methodology as a tool capable of accounting for the variability of such accounts in a way that translates community wisdom into meaningful recommendations for decision makers.

Overall, this research found that improving resident and service provider experiences of shock events requires greater attention to the emotional and social aspects of resilience. Our recommendations include interventions to focus on increasing connections between service providers and communities as fundamental to ensuring communities survive and recover well from disaster events.