

From Drought, to Fire, to Flood: The Cost of Climate Change and its Impacts on Australia's Homeless Young People

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Bushfires are a natural reoccurring event that shape the magnificent Australian landscape, but extreme heat and one of the worst droughts on record led to the catastrophic bushfire seasons, known as Black Summer. From June 2019 through to February 2020, bushfires raged across Australia, burning an estimated 12.6 million hectares, destroying thousands of buildings including 3000 homes, killing 33 people, and over one billion mammals, birds, and reptiles.¹

Using the findings from the 2009 Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission, it is possible to calculate the tangible costs of Black Summer. This includes replacing homes, contents, vehicles, loss of livestock, feed, crops, and even lives lost directly as a result of the fires. But what is more difficult to calculate are the intangible social costs such as mental health issues, unemployment, increases in suicide, substance abuse, relationship breakdowns, domestic violence, as well as homelessness, which will continue to be felt for years to come.

During the peak December and January holiday season thousands of tourists were forced to evacuate coastal regions across Australia. The message from fire authorities was clear: *'If you don't need to be here, leave now.'*² Tourism is a major part of Australia's economy and many coastal and regional towns are reliant on tourism, especially at peak times, to thrive.³

Historically, bushfires have tended to only hurt the local economies directly hit by the bushfires. This season, however, reduced tourism also impacted non-fire affected regions choked with smoke given the scale of the fires.

Tourism decline has created an employment crisis, with young people hit particularly hard as businesses were forced to close. Young people are overwhelmingly much more likely to be employed in casual and seasonal roles. Casual employees have no job security and are employed on a needs-basis. Small businesses and independent retailers, like those found in regional and coastal New South Wales (NSW), are also more likely to employ workers on a casual basis.⁴

In addition, young people are most commonly employed in retail and hospitality positions, both industries that have a very high concentration of young casual workers and are most sensitive to fluctuations in tourism and footfall.⁵ As such, they were hit particularly hard during the recent bushfire crisis. Drought affected regions have seen a similar decline in employment opportunities for young people, with no work for those employed as farm hands on a casual basis.

Lack of employment coupled with a decrease in affordable housing are key drivers of youth homelessness.⁶ Homelessness and anti-poverty groups have long warned of the lack of affordable housing available across NSW for those experiencing homelessness.⁷ This has been compounded by mass evacuations and the loss or damage of homes – some nine per cent of NSW residents surveyed reported that their property was unsuitable to live in as a result of the bushfires.⁸ This means that more people are now competing for housing with an already scarce housing supply.⁹ Yfoundations spoke with a number of services across the youth homelessness sector and heard anecdotally how the bushfire crisis is affecting young people experiencing homelessness.

Firstly, the accessibility of temporary accommodation available to young people experiencing homelessness has dropped as rooms are filled by the influx of emergency workers from non-fire affected regions.

We also heard that unscrupulous landlords and holiday lessors are taking advantage of the climate emergency by increasing rents on their properties as a result of property shortages around fire-affected regions. One Specialist Homelessness Service (SHS) shared that a bedsit often rented by young people had increased in price from \$200 to \$300 per week. Adding to this, insurance companies were prepared to pay up to 12-months in advance to secure tenancies for their insured clients, further hindering efforts of young people trying to gain access to the rental markets. Young homeless people rarely have savings making it difficult to compete against insured and wealthier homeowners.

Finally, young people continue to find themselves disadvantaged by the private rental market, as landlords prioritise families directly impacted by the bushfire emergency. An SHS shared anecdotal evidence where a landlord pulled out of a tenancy agreement at the eleventh hour, despite the fact that the young person had already completed the required financial and reference checks, in favour of a family impacted by the bushfires.

While the effect of the 2019-20 Australian bushfires is still being analysed, it has become clear that the fires have impacted much more than just bricks-and-mortar for the youth homelessness sector.

Professor Biddle from the Australian National University (ANU) conducted a poll on 'Exposure and the impact

on attitudes of the 2019–20 Australia Bushfires'. The poll found that over half of Australia's adults were anxious or worried for the safety of themselves, their close family or friends, due to the bushfire crisis.¹⁰

Anxieties are further exacerbated for frontline staff. Staff not only worry about their own risk, and risk to their family and friends, but also the safety and the wellbeing of their vulnerable clients. Yfoundations spoke to a number of member services who spoke about the challenges the bushfires have placed on their already overburdened staff. Road closures during the bushfire season prevented staff from reaching clients who live in isolated communities, and some staff were physically unable to travel to work due to fire and advice from the Rural Fire Service, as a result they were placed on leave until roads reopened.

For services who support children and young people under 16, there were logistical challenges such as trying to manage evacuations as staff supervision is required for children aged under 16. All the while, staff had to manage their own personal grief and loss during this period, including loss of property.

We know from past climate emergencies that homeless children and young people face many disadvantages, as they live on no income or low incomes. Problematically for them, to evacuate a bushfire you need to have access to transportation, mobile phones with data, and access to temporary housing as well as other basic necessities such as food. All of which costs money. Many homeless young people do not have access to readily available finances, particularly those aged under 16 who are not entitled to Centrelink, and therefore rely solely on homelessness services to support them.

Furthermore, once homeless young people escaped the immediate bushfire danger, many were faced with another set of challenges — accessing documentation and support. Young people who experience homelessness struggle to access their documentation and identification at the best of times, but during the bushfire crisis this became an even greater challenge.

Yfoundations members shared that young people were often prevented from accessing Centrelink entitlements and other supports as they had to 'prove' they were directly impacted by the bushfires, which is near impossible for those rough sleeping or couch surfing, as they have no way of verifying their address.

Yfoundations also heard from members who struggled finding affordable fresh produce and groceries during the bushfire crisis. Damage to fresh produce and logistical transport barriers put upward pressure on prices, placing young people under additional financial strain. The financial pressure and uncertainty around their health, housing, and employment added to their anxiety and worsened other mental health issues, compounding an already devastating bushfire season.

As natural disasters are likely to become more frequent and potentially more devastating, we must now work towards building a youth homelessness sector that is able to withstand these increasing pressures. The NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) must guarantee adequate funding for services. Beyond this, we must look to bring the homelessness sector into the 21st century and capitalise on existing online tools and telecommunications infrastructure to ensure that young people living in remote areas can continue to access support during a crisis.

This is not simply a resourcing issue. We must ensure that young people have pathways to independence, job security and equity in the private rental market. The NSW Government must explore opportunities to incentivise landlords and businesses to support young people. The cost to society for failing to support our vulnerable young people is simply far too high.

As this article goes to print, Covid-19 has dominated the news cycle, devastating our economy and placing fear and uncertainty in the minds of every Australian. Through all this, we must never forget the silent casualty of these consecutive natural and global health disasters: young people experiencing homelessness, who live day-to-day relying on service support and human compassion.

Endnotes

1. Werner J and Lyons S 2020, The size of Australia's bushfire crisis captured in five big numbers, *ABC Science*, 5 March 2020.
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4. Gilfillan G, *Characteristics and Use of Casual Employees in Australia*, Research Paper, Parliament of Australia, January 2018, p.1.
5. Ibid.
6. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2019, *Youth Homelessness in 2018/19*, Fact Sheet, Australian Government.
7. Gurrán N et al 2019, *Informal Accommodation and Vulnerable Households*, Report, The University of Sydney, April 2019.
8. The Australia Institute 2020, *Polling: Bushfire Crisis and Concern About Climate Change*, Report, January 2020, p.3.
9. ABC News 2020, *NSW Government Reveals \$1bn Fire Fund as RFS Confirms 2,600 Homes Damaged or Destroyed*, 9 January 2020, ABC News.
10. Professor Nicholas Biddle 2020, *Exposure and the impact on attitudes of the 2019–20 Australian Bushfires*, ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods, February 2020.



Photo by Hilary Faye for Hope Street Youth and Family Services