

What makes us prepare for bushfires?

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Why we did it

Many of Australia's populated areas are at risk of bushfire, and preparing is a key household and community safety practice in these locations.

Bushfire preparation increases the capacity of individuals to maintain or regain prior levels of functioning following significant hazard activity.

However, although considerable effort has been directed towards encouraging preparedness for bushfires in Australia, levels of household preparation remain low.

Past research examining natural hazards has demonstrated that neither susceptibility to a hazard and perception of risk, nor providing information about a hazard or its consequences results in a significant increase in preparation.

People must decide to prepare or not, a decision influenced by motivational and interpretive (social-environmental) factors.

To understand this choice an exploration of the cognitive processes that bring about decision making and behaviour change was required.

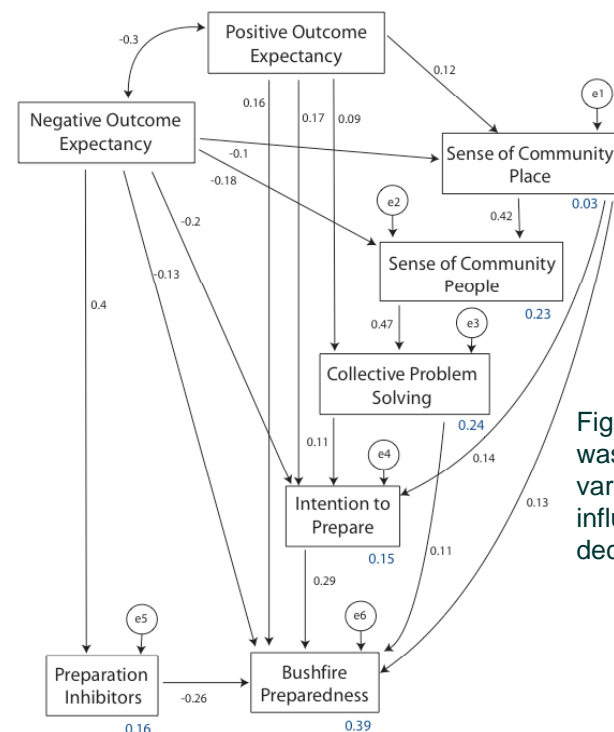


Figure 2. Structural Equation Modelling was used to quantify the importance of a variety of decision cues as factors that influence household bushfire preparation decisions.

What we did

Qualitative	In-depth interviews (Pilot) Interview analysis Development of surveys from interviews
Quantitative	Survey distribution (wave 1) Survey analysis
Qualitative	In-depth interviews Interview analysis - theory development
Quantitative	Survey re-development Survey distribution (wave 2) Survey analysis - theory validation

Figure 1. Methodological process

What we found

- The Preparedness Dichotomy
 - People either chose to prepare or chose not to prepare
 - Several key decision cues influenced this choice: outcome expectancy, sense of community, preparation inhibitors, collective problem solving and intentions to prepare (Figure 2).
- An Exception or the Norm?
 - Well prepared households were the exception
 - People who thought they would stay to defend were more likely to prepare; people who chose to leave were less likely to prepare
- Bushfire Preparation is Haphazard
 - Few people made a special effort to prepare
 - Preparations that fell in line with householders' common activities (like mowing the lawn for a clear space) were more likely to be undertaken than activities that required specific bushfire related thinking or action
- Collective Action in Preparation
 - Social networking around bushfire issues at the community level is important for increasing community preparedness levels

What does it mean for bushfire risk communication?

Because people chose to prepare or not, risk communicators need to acknowledge that those choosing not to prepare require different information than people already preparing, or upgrading their existing preparations.

Householders are unsure of what "well-prepared" actually means. Many people avoid making significant preparations if what they already do around their homes is perceived to be sufficient. It is important for householders to be able to identify which preparations they must do, and those that add to an already well-prepared property.

Some messages contained in the current risk communication information are miscommunicated, misunderstood or misinterpreted. Devoting effort to correcting these issues will be critical in increasing community bushfire preparedness. For example:

Householders misunderstand the "stay or go" and "prepare regardless" messages. Bushfire managers must clearly communicate the preparedness imperative, then indicate that once prepared people should plan their course of action regarding staying or going.

Sense of community is an important factor influencing preparedness. Community engagement in bushfire risk management can build a sense of community in a number of ways: it builds trust, encourages information sharing within the community or between community and risk managers, generates mutual understanding of risk management and community behaviour, and draws community and agencies together around a shared purpose.

Community variability can reduce the utility of passive mass communicated risk information because not everyone can understand it or interpret it properly. Risk managers must utilise active mechanisms (like community engagement) to identify and address community variability to increase preparedness.

Being well prepared is as much mental as material. Successful risk education programs should include assistance to help householders develop the mental capacity to prepare – especially if the policy objective is to encourage all households to prepare regardless of their plans about staying to defend or leaving early.

