

UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITIES PROJECT

Bulletin No 4

The Bushfire CRC was established under the Commonwealth Government's Cooperative Research Centres (CRC) Programme.

The CRC aims to provide research which enhances the management of the bushfire risk to the community in an economically and ecologically sustainable way.

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BELOW: COMMUNITY MEETING AT SWIFTS CREEK COUNTRY FIRE AUTHORITY (CFA), VICTORIA PICTURE DEPARTMENT OF SUSTAINABILITY AND ENVIRONMENT, VICTORIA



The Understanding Communities Project C1 is part of the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre's national research program. The aim of the project is to increase community resilience to bushfires. For more information visit the project website at www.bushfirecrc.com

DEFINING COMMUNITIES

How do we define a community in the context of bushfire mitigation and planning? Are we describing what is really there, or what we want to be in place? Is the physical locality of importance or not? What are the implications for service providers? There is a long history of discussion about defining communities. By 1955 there were 94 definitions of community. This bulletin mentions a few of those definitions that are relevant to fire service delivery.

RURAL VERSUS URBAN

Historically, rural communities were often seen to be the opposite of urban communities, and in some cases seen as more 'real'. Small rural communities were seen as being more cohesive with closer and more intimate relationships than cities which were seen as alienating, with few intimate social relationships. Today this view is challenged on the observations that small communities can also be highly controlling and if people are not in the 'in group' then they can be isolated. In large cities there are opportunities for people to develop relationships with more like-minded individuals. Fire services want to know if there is a difference in attitude to mitigation and response between urban and rural communities.

LOCATION

Location has often been seen as part of the way to define a community. However, even geographic boundaries can be a little difficult to define in some cases. Fire service delivery is based on boundaries defined by the agency and part of the history of the organisation. Legislative boundaries may not coincide with agency boundaries. Census data boundaries may not coincide with either, making research a little more difficult.

NETWORKS

Since the late 1970s, social networks have been seen to be very important in helping define communities. Sometimes those networks are outside location boundaries, and can now involve the internet. Fire services are a type of community based on networks.

IDEAL VERSUS OBSERVED

We have to be careful that in defining communities they are not stereotyped in ways which turn them into caricatures of what is believed to be a 'good' or 'bad' community.

TIME

It is also necessary to be mindful that in the context of service delivery and hazards, what constitutes the community to be involved may change, not only over time, but also over the course of an event.

The benefits of community studies to hazard mitigation and planning clearly remains useful, but it must be acknowledged that each community will be different and that this needs to be understood by service providers. Most importantly, service providers may define the communities they serve on the basis of the geographical or location boundaries defined by their organisation. The people being serviced may define their communities on the basis of location and/or networks.

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