

CLIMATE, CRISIS, AND CARE: SERVICE STRAIN IN A CHANGING AUSTRALIA



Project title:	Building climate resilience in the social and community care workforce
Investigators:	Prof. Sarah MacLean, Julia de Nicola, Dr Kimberlea Cooper, Dr Heather Downey, Dr Jacqui Theobald, Dr Lisa de Kley, Eleanor Costello, Prof. Lauren Rickards
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Location:	National
Partners:	Alcohol and Drug Foundation (ADF)



CONTEXT

Climate change is increasingly affecting our health and social care sectors, placing new pressures on the broader care workforce who support marginalised populations. As extreme weather events, environmental degradation, and related social disruptions become more common, the care workforce is facing heightened demand for services. How this impacts people who use substances is poorly understood, but existing studies indicate that increased substance use is likely during natural disasters that are becoming more frequent, alongside unplanned substance withdrawal and exacerbated mental health conditions. These challenges are compounded by the emotional toll of supporting individuals experiencing climate-related trauma and instability, often without adequate systemic support or training. This project seeks to identify the knowledge and skills that social workers and other community sector care staff require to support community resilience and sustainability in the care workforce.



APPROACH

Building on an initial pilot study and scoping review that examined the effects of climate change and extreme weather events on substance use—finding short-term increases in alcohol and other drug (AOD) use, alongside disruptions to treatment services that compounded mental health issues and led to greater hospitalisations and vulnerability—this collaboration between La Trobe researchers and ADF is now focused on identifying the support needs of Local Drug and Alcohol Teams (LDATs) across Australia. Using a narrative approach to explore how individuals make sense of their social experiences, these frontline perspectives and insights reveal how extreme events disrupt treatment, increase service user distress, and strain already limited resources. Their narratives help reveal not only the systemic gaps and emerging pressures within the sector but also the adaptive strategies that can inform more resilient, responsive, and sustainable service models in the face of escalating climate disruptions.



OUTCOMES

While floods and other emergencies affecting the lives of potential interviewees have made recruitment to the study challenging, they have offered valuable insights into the real-time impacts on communities and care workers. Emerging themes highlight how layers of disadvantage are intensified by repeated climate-related emergencies, with grief over the loss of community and ecosystems deeply affecting people's sense of place and well-being—factors that can contribute to increased substance use. Narratives also reveal that short-term, reactive funding—often redirected to new crises—undermines long-term, generational support for highly traumatised communities. A review of international literature indicates that agencies are generally underprepared for climate emergencies, underscoring the need for further research into how local responses can better support community resilience.

"You go to a forum like that with 80 people, ... they're all, everybody in the sector is traumatised, yeah. ... Because of the floods that they've really had five years of ... drought, fire, flood. We haven't, the sector hasn't, had a break for five years."

LDAT worker





E: ceri@latrobe.edu.au
W: <https://www.latrobe.edu.au/research/ceri>



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