

AJEM readership favourite papers



**Associate Professor
Melissa Parsons**

University of New England
AJEM Editor-in-Chief

Since 1986, AJEM has published an estimated 2,000 peer-reviewed research papers from Australia, New Zealand and around the world.

This growing body of knowledge has documented the tremendous expansion in emergency management planning and policy, the growth in rigour in academia and practice, the transfer of research within the sector and the adoption and testing of improved approaches to much of how we plan, respond and renew after disaster events.

In its 40th year of publication, AJEM is publishing reflections from readers around the world to recall their favourite and most influential paper(s).

The importance of queer community resilience

By Billy Tusker Haworth

Volume 37(1):31–32, 2022

<https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/ajem-january-2022-the-importance-of-queer-community-resilience>

Submitted anonymously

Why is this paper significant to you and why has it held your attention?

LGBTQIA+ vulnerabilities remain a key challenge for disaster management research, policy and practice. It also takes an opportunity to highlight the capacities and resilience qualities of LGBTQIA+ people and groups.

How has this paper influenced your work? Or, how has this paper had a significant influence in this area of emergency management?

I am now embarking on a research PhD on LGBTQIA+ personnel's experiences working in Australian emergency services.

Beyond 2026, what's next in this field of research or practice that builds on this paper?

Addressing the challenges of translating research into disaster policy and practice.



New approaches to assessing vulnerability and resilience

By Phillip Buckle, Graham Mars and Syd Smale

Volume 15(2):8–14, 2000

www.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/AUJEmMgmt/2007/17.pdf

Submitted by: Melissa Parsons

Department of Geography and Planning,
University of New England, Armidale

Why is this paper significant to you and why has it held your attention?

This paper introduced me to disaster resilience. As an environmental scientist, I had been doing river research using the Resilience Alliance body of work about resilience in social-ecological systems. When I started writing and teaching a unit on natural hazards I came to realise, with the help of the definitions and ideas in this paper, that disaster resilience was a divergent social science concept that I should delve into. So, I guess that Buckle et al. seeded an interest that has led to my ongoing learning, teaching, and research in disaster resilience. Perhaps most importantly, the Buckle et al. paper explained the differences and similarities between disaster vulnerability and disaster resilience. That Australian communities may simultaneously be at risk, vulnerable, and have agency and resilience remains one of the most important highlights from this paper for me, and one of the most important practice foundations to disaster preparation, mitigation, response and recovery.

How has this paper influenced your work? Or, how has this paper had a significant influence in this area of emergency management?

The paper also introduced me to the idea that agency and capacity could be operationalised into elements that support resilience (such as sustainability of social and economic life, established networks, resources and skills, and social infrastructure) and that these could subsequently form the basis for assessing resilience. My research to develop the Australian Disaster Resilience Index applied the same idea, where we assessed disaster resilience as a set of 8 capacities (or elements) that represent our defined system of supporting resources.

New approaches to assessing vulnerability and resilience

Introduction

Identifying who exactly are the vulnerable people in the community has been accepted for some time as a necessary part of effective emergency and disaster planning. With the introduction and general commitment throughout Australia to a risk management approach to emergency management, the need to identify vulnerabilities has been given impetus (Salter 1997). The authors are particularly interested in developing the concept of vulnerability and of improving methods for assessing that vulnerability. However, it seems to us that there is still a limited understanding of what the terms vulnerability and resilience include.

This lack of understanding often constrains the effective practice of emergency management. As well as dealing with a variety of potential risks, emergency managers have to deal with a range of potential needs and potential capacities to cope of individuals, groups, communities and agencies about which they have only a partial and incomplete understanding. This necessarily limits the options that can be developed to reduce risk to the community. Equally, individuals, communities and agencies have an equally demarcated understanding of risks, hazards, vulnerabilities and capacities. As a result, understanding of options for effective risk management as well as for supporting local capability are also limited.

Some people, of particular note Ken Granger and his colleagues engaged in the Cities Project (Granger et al. 1999), are developing a better and more detailed understanding of risk and vulnerability. However, we believe that there are a number of additional facets to resilience and vulnerability that need further exploration as we discuss below.

In this paper we identify specific issues that are central to a proper and complete understanding of vulnerability and resilience.

As we progress in our study of vulnerability and resilience we hope to incorporate these elements into a coherent framework that is capable of systematic application by emergency managers and community members to generally inform

by Phillip Buckle, Manager, State Emergency Recovery Unit, Dept of Human Services, Victoria, Dr Graham Mars, Lecturer, School of Social Science and Planning, RMIT University, and Rev Syd Smale, State Disaster Recovery Coordinator, Victorian Council of Churches

the process of risk assessment and risk management planning more thoroughly than is now possible. This will be a practical and applied aim. We also expect to develop a better theoretical basis for the understanding of vulnerability and resilience and to integrate with other disciplines such as community development, social psychology, community economics and environmental management.

Background

Recent events in Victoria and elsewhere have stimulated an interest in assessing vulnerability that had recently become evident and which was developing in significant ways. The January 1997 bushfires in the Dandenong Ranges was a generally well managed community support and recovery process. The lead taken by local government, and the level of support provided by the local community to its own members, served as a model of local coordination and management.

However, there are some indications that it took some time for the recovery process to identify all vulnerable groups. In particular single parent families, usually with low incomes and typically with constraints upon the time of the sole parent and comprising just over 10% of the total population, may have lacked opportunities to fully participate in some community recovery activities. Following the East Gippsland floods of June 1998 it also became apparent that there were a number of distinct groups that had special needs.

Families in remote areas lacked access to child care facilities (other than a travelling child care support group whose funding was shortly due to cease); other people in remote areas had very consi-

derable distances to travel to access services and support; in some of the farming areas an aged population faced difficulties in recovering from their losses and the whole area was made more vulnerable through the effects of 2 years of drought preceding the floods.

Vulnerability was as much a result of exposure to 2 years of drought and many years of environmental alteration, and the effects of isolation (extended travel time, poor communications and so forth), as it was to the passing effects of the flood itself.

The Gas Shortage of September 1998 in Victoria also highlighted particular vulnerabilities in the community when gas restrictions were applied. Aged people, new born babies and infants, people with particular medical conditions or with terminal illnesses requiring palliative care, people on life support systems, and the disabled all had special requirements for support. Yet many of the aged who were expected to be vulnerable actually coped better than was expected by emergency managers. The elderly had experience and coping strategies not available to younger people, that they had gained from working through previous life difficulties such as the Great Depression and the Second World War.

Of less immediate priority were a number of other groups. People laid off from work that experienced an unexpected reduction in income, businesses forced to close temporarily and people that needed to purchase electrical cooking and heating.

On a broader scale still, there were groups of people that required specialist information on dealing with the effects of the loss of gas in terms of alternative cooking and heating options, the safe disposal of food and other putrescible materials, and safe methods of heating and using water for bathing.

These events, and the ways in which they have highlighted community needs occurring in the context of a change from a hazard based focus on emergency management to a risk based focus, set a starting point for our consideration of vulnerability as it applies to emergency management.

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Beyond 2026, what's next in this field of research or practice that builds on this paper?

Concepts of disaster risk, vulnerability, and resilience have been studied and applied almost in a decades long sequence, and generally as separate concepts. I'd like to hope that in an era of increasing natural hazard complexity and impact, that theoreticians and practitioners can integrate the cognate ideas of risk, vulnerability, and resilience into new and thoughtful ways to support and serve communities.

Changing the rules of the game: mechanisms that shape responsibility-sharing from beyond Australian fire and emergency management

By Blythe McLennan and John Handmer

Volume 27(2):7–13, 2012

<https://search.informit.org/doi/epdf/10.3316/informit.476937774529897>

Submitted by: Jim McLennan

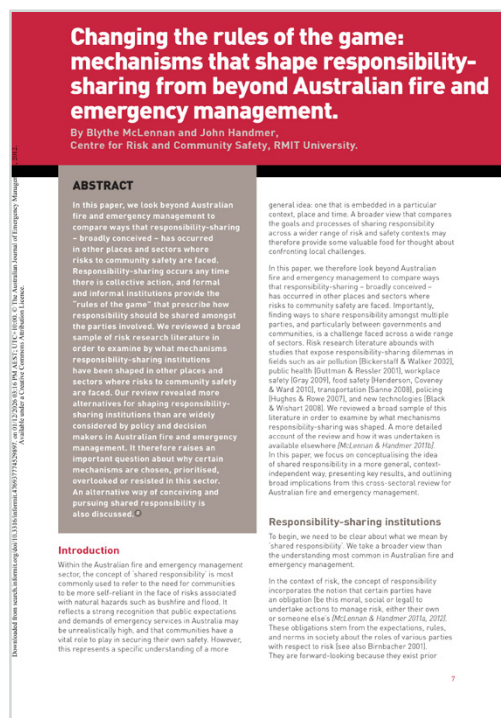
Adjunct Professor, La Trobe University School of Psychology and Public Health

Why is this paper significant to you and why has it held your attention?

The paper was the first critical analysis I read of the then Federal government's newly announced policy of 'shared responsibility'. Because I was so heavily involved in post-Black Saturday field research involving interviews with householders who had been impacted by disaster-level bushfires I had not really paid attention on the emergence of the policy. Due to my background in industrial and organisational psychology, I was not really attuned to the importance of the wider socio/political contextual issues for any programs aimed at improving community and householder bushfire safety. The paper by B McLennan and J Handmer was an eye opener.

How has this paper influenced your work? Or, how has this paper had a significant influence in this area of emergency management?

It made me sadder, but wiser. In its wake I became less naively optimistic about improving levels of community and householder bushfire safety amid climate change and the increasing frequency and severity of natural hazard dangers.



Beyond 2026, what's next in this field of research or practice that builds on this paper?

I am no longer actively involved in community and householder bushfire safety research. But I remain convinced that the focus must remain on raising community-level awareness of natural hazard threat and preparedness so that this translates in householder awareness and preparedness. The power of so-called 'descriptive norms' remains unsurpassed: householders tend to do what they see other householders (like 'them') do about potential hazards.

To contribute

We want to hear from you about your favourite or most influential paper. All you need to do is to revisit AJEM's vast content and reflect on the paper(s) that have been novel, inspirational and even transformative. Provide a few short answers to questions about why that paper was significant to you, how it has influenced your practice and what might be built on from the paper. Selected reflections will be published in AJEM throughout 2026.

Make your contribution at https://unesurveys.au1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_4Ts0FudXHh0tpZQ

This call for contributions will remain open up to end of August 2026.