



40 years of recovery in the *Australian Journal of Emergency Management*

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I have had the privilege of being invited to provide a summary of how recovery has been reflected in the 40-year history of the *Australian Journal of Emergency Management* (AJEM).

When I started working in disaster recovery, AJEM was one of the resources I frantically flipped through to absorb information, trying to understand my role as the Recovery Coordinator at Australian Red Cross. The editions arrived at my desk 4 times a year, posted from Mount Macedon as part of a free subscription. I would devour each edition, whether at my desk or on the move as I worked with communities affected by the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires.

Looking back through 40 years of AJEM has been a real pleasure. I've organised my reflections by decade and theme, while reluctantly leaving out many favourites to keep to the word count.

1980s

The Macedon Digest (the precursor to AJEM) was first published in 1986¹, and throughout the decade, Ruth Wraith and Rob Gordon authored a series of 9 articles on 'Human Responses to Disasters', exploring the impacts of disasters on individuals, communities and the emergency management workforce (see also Vol 41/1, 2026). These pieces are written in non-clinical and accessible language, targeting emergency management workers. They catalogue the predictable challenges likely to be experienced by disaster-affected communities but also (importantly) identify how services can help. These articles are impressive in the way they seamlessly traverse the impacts of disasters across individuals, family, community and systems. While some

of the language and framing have inevitably changed in the subsequent decades, these articles are unbelievably solid and have stood the test of time.

Early editions also featured research summaries on the psychological and social impacts of disasters including Sandy McFarlane's study of Ash Wednesday firefighters, reporting on long-term psychological disorders and physical health issues comparable to military veterans (Vol 2/1, 1987). Helpfully, McFarlane linked this study to another one undertaken with children affected by the fires, framing firefighter mental health as a broader family and community concern rather than an occupational hazard. Julie Jones's study identified both positive and negative effects on Ash Wednesday workers' relationships, health and careers (Vol 2/2, 1987). In 1989, Neil Britton examined how sociological research had advanced the understanding of community level impacts of disasters (Vol 4/2 and Vol 4/3, 1989).

Roger Jones's article about future directions in recovery planning noted that 2 meetings in 1980 and 1981 were the first real attempts at national recovery planning in Australia, informed by lessons from Cyclone Tracy. He highlighted a divide between the 'welfare' and 'technical' elements of recovery (Vol 4/4, 1989).

One of the noticeable elements of these editions is how sophisticated insights into the human experience of recovery sit awkwardly within a largely militaristic representation of the sector. In one edition, for example, after exceptional pieces from Wraith and Gordon (p.3-5) and Jones (p.6-7) (Vol 2/2, 1987), a list of Australian Counter Disaster College

1. See <https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/collections/macedon-digest>

training for emergency managers offers courses focused on hazard analysis techniques, counter disaster approaches and response management. While the information about recovery is there, it's presented as adjacent to the work emergency managers need to train for.

1990s

What seems like an awkward nestling of information in the 1980s, started to emerge as a tension in how recovery was written about in the 1990s. The divide becomes starker between describing the aftermath of disasters as community impacts needing support, compared to situations needing operational consideration after the response phase. There are multiple examples of this tension.

In 1990, Kerry Gartland from the Victorian State Government outlined the complexity of recovery and the importance of government taking their lead from affected communities. She provided insights on understanding disaster impacts and offered a nuanced definition of recovery that squarely centred affected communities. Gartland's firm handle on complexity, her focus on community self-determination, and her understanding of the pressures on the recovery workforce is superbly insightful (Vol 5/2-3, 1990).

In contrast, later in the same edition there is a summary report from the Natural Disaster Organisation about their response to a 1990 flood event, where the authors proudly outlined their role and successes in response. Recovery warranted a small paragraph at the end (Vol 5/2-3, p.15, 1990):

We did have some problem with the transition from response to recovery, which we are addressing, and our plan worked quite well.

Also in 1990, a report on a Queensland flood referred only to disaster affected people in terms of rescue and shelter headcount (Vol 5/1B, 1990). This is contrasted by a report in the same edition from 4 Australian recovery workers who were invited on a knowledge exchange trip to San Francisco, reflecting (Vol 5/1B, p.3, 1990):

It was interesting to note that, despite the enormous differences in scale and culture between the US and Australian disasters, the same issues arose based on the fundamental right of people to manage their own recovery; to have equal access to information and services; and to retain control over their own lives and decision making processes.

The increased framing of recovery as a phase of emergency management rather than primarily as a human experience is reflected in other contributions, including Julie Frittam's overview of South Australia's recovery arrangements (Vol 7/3, 1992), Barry McPhee's account of coordinating the 1990 Charleville flood recovery (Vol 7/3, 1992), Barry

Wraith's examination of disaster payments through the Department of Social Security (Vol 8/2, 1993) and accounts of recovery services following the Dandenong Ranges fires (Vol 13/2, 1998). AJEM articles in the 1990s also discussed now familiar concepts, including community recovery committees, 'one-stop shops' (McPhee, Vol 7/3, 1992), and phases such as 'heroic' and 'honeymoon' (Dawe, Vol 14/1, 1999).

Philip Buckle and colleagues contributed significantly to evolving discussions on recovery management throughout the 1990s. Their work addressed Victorian recovery coordination arrangements identified pressing issues for recovery managers for the decade (Vol 7/3, 1992) and emphasised the need to 'support the whole person' after disasters, highlighting the sector's limited understanding of secondary and tertiary impacts (Vol 13/2, 1998). They also advocated for greater community involvement in decision-making noting this was rarely achieved in practice (Vol 8/3, 1993). Andrew Coghlan and Philip Buckle argued for community development approaches and attention to context in recovery (Vol 9/4, p.3, 1994):

In any disaster the physical impact of the event may be seen to be an overlay on pre-existing societal and community conditions prior to its taking place.

As recovery programs became more common, many of these contributors also pushed for improvement. Buckle doggedly pushed for recovery managers to adopt accountability standards (Vol 7/3, p.15, 1992):

At the moment we have no standards or criteria by which to measure the performance of disaster recovery management or the effectiveness of the assistance made available after disasters.

My wildcard read of the review is Robert Barchard of the Queensland State Emergency Service in 1991, misleadingly titled 'Earthquakes: Part of the "all hazards approach"'. Barchard raised serious concerns about emergency service organisations overseeing holistic disaster management, arguing that this would inevitably frame disasters as large incidents to be managed rather than complex systems with intersecting components. He pointed to the limitations of emergency services to cope with the realities of impacts on communities (Vol 6/4, p.10, 1991):

I have the highest regard for the professional standards and dedication of our emergency services, but I believe there is a lack of understanding across the board of what a real disaster involves and the chaos it creates ... In any major disaster, the scenario of the well drilled emergency service machine is a fantasy. The community and its proliferation of volunteer groups will become involved, and indeed have the right to be involved, and they will not react according to emergency services and standard operating procedures.

2000s

One shift I noticed in the new decade was the disappearance of first-hand accounts that characterised AJEM articles in the 1980s and 1990s, replaced by a more formal approach that echoed the growing reports on the professionalisation of emergency management.

Several articles by the magnificent Anne Eyre (UK researcher and Hillsborough disaster survivor) are peppered throughout this decade. These include her advocacy for emergency management organisations to acknowledge the impacts their processes have on disaster affected people (Vol 17/1, 2002), an accessible overview of the psychosocial impacts of disasters and subsequent implications for disaster managers (Vol 19/4, 2004) and a sensitive, practical guide to returning personal items after disaster events with Lucy Easthope (nee Payne) (Vol 21/2, 2006).

Several articles looked at the ambiguity of language being used in the disaster management sector and its effects on policy and practice. One is John Handmer's classic 'We are all vulnerable', where he pointed to challenges of how terms such as 'vulnerability', 'risk' and 'capacity' are meaningfully used (Vol 18/3, 2003). Another discusses what a 'community' is (Buckle et al., Vol 18/2, 2003).

Lessons from recovery across several significant disasters were reflected in this decade, including a comparative analysis of government communication following September 11 and the London bombings (Nicholls and Healy, Vol 23/3, 2008), a review of government supports after the 2003 Canberra bushfires (Winkworth et al., Vol 24/2, 2009) and

discussions of lessons from informal economies following the Boxing Day tsunami (Handmer and Choong, Vol 21/4, 2006).

The fourth edition of 2004 (Vol 19/4, 2004) was dedicated to the 'quiet revolution' Andrew Coghlan and Sarah Norman observed taking place in Australia and New Zealand recovery, post September 11. This included Cole and Buckle's article on principles for community capability in disaster planning, Rob Gordon's much referenced article about the social system as the site of disaster impacts, and Annabel Beckham and Susan Nicholls's analysis of the communication aspect of the 2003 Canberra bushfire recovery.

Two articles from this decade elicited strong reactions from me. The first is by Margery Webster, reflecting on her experience as a recovery worker following the Ash Wednesday bushfires (Vol 21/1, 2006). She recalled the community's lack of trust in government, the importance of the community 'action group' acting as a trusted liaison to services and as a 'watch dog' for the community, the strain for people living in temporary accommodation, divisions caused by perceived inequity in support, the burden of invisible labour carried by women, the exacerbation and acceleration of pre-existing health issues, and the complexity of parenting in post-disaster environments. Webster's 2006 retelling of events that happened in 1983 could be replicated in 2026, and it made me want to weep in frustration.

Happily, the second piece provoked delight. Canadian journalist and disaster researcher Joseph Scanlon's article on a Canadian town's reception of diverted flights on September 11 is amazing (Vol 18/2, 2003). The tale of how the people of Gander punched above their weight (as a town of approximately 10,000 people that received 38 diverted planes and approximately 7,000 people) has been captured in the stage show *Come From Away*, but Scanlon analyses the factors that made this such a successful operation. I could write an entire paper on this article and why the actions captured here align strongly with evidence. Do yourself a favour and read it; it will make you feel better about the world.

2010s

A consistent theme in the 2010s was the importance of community-led approaches to recovery. Articles include Margaret Moreton's research on the tensions between government-led and community-led approaches to recovery (Vol 33/1, 2018), case studies from the Central Goldfields Shire on community-led recovery initiatives (Vol 28/4, 2013) and recommendations from Major General Chris Ford for how community recovery can be optimised (Vol 33/1, 2018).



In 2013, we see Anne Leadbeater's classic case study of the Strathewen Renewal Association (Vol 28/3, p.46, 2013):

If the value of community leadership in recovery is to be fully realised, it is imperative that recovery agencies and government at all levels acknowledge that disasters do not happen in a vacuum. Prior to being impacted, every community has existing values, networks, projects, relationships, knowledge and capacity that underpin its day to day operations, and indeed, it's very identity. But the imposition of externally constituted and 'templated' recovery models can seriously undermine inherent community resilience.

Several articles also examined the importance of a depth of understanding of recovery in the emergency management workforce. These include Carole Owen's exploration of how government can support community-led recovery (Vol 33/1, 2018) and Anne Eyre's assessment of the importance of skilled, empathic facilitators to offer psychosocial support (Vol 32/3, 2017). These articles are complemented by critiques of traditional emergency management for its militaristic framing that privileges emergency managers' expertise and positions affected communities as victims (Krolik, Vol 28/4, 2013) and the narrow focus of disaster inquiries, where Cole et al. note the persistent omission of recovery (Vol 33/2, 2018).

A 2013 edition focusing on gender and disaster featured Deb Parkinson and Claire Zara's landmark research on family violence following the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires, Tricia Hazelger's analysis of strategic issues for gender and recovery, and Mae Proudley's work on connection and disruption to place (Vol 28/2, 2013).

Children and young people were also the focus of thematic editions, featuring thoughtful summaries of the paradox of children's simultaneous vulnerability and resilience by Kevin Ronan (Vol 29/1, 2014) and again by US researcher Lori Peek (Vol 29/1, 2014), a report from Brett McDermott on the advances in mental health evidence to support children affected by disasters (Vol 29/1, 2014), an overview by Susan Davie and colleagues outlining the importance of child friendly spaces in evacuation and recovery centres (Vol 29/1, 2014) and Lisa Gibbs and colleagues' principles for practitioners and policy makers supporting the recovery of children and young people (Vol 29/1, 2014).

A range of recovery frameworks and guidelines emerged during this decade, reported in AJEM. These included efforts toward national consistency, resulting in the National Impact Assessment Framework and the National Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (Verlin and Argyous, Vol 33/1, 2018), the National Guidelines on the Management of Donated Goods (Vol 28/1, 2013), Shona Whitton's precursor report to the National Psychosocial Guidelines for Temporary Memorial Management (Vol 33/1, 2018) and the Collective Trauma Event Guidelines



(Vol 33/4, 2018). The National Principles for Disaster Recovery were also revised twice, with the ongoing relevance of the content largely reaffirmed (Vol 33/3, 2018).

A small but mighty article that stood out to me reported on the Lancefield-Cobaw fires that started when a controlled burn breached containment lines. The emphasis on the significance of the sincere and public apology offered by government representatives as the starting point for recovery is a lesson we would be remiss to forget (Brown and Scott, Vol 33/1, 2018).

2020s

One surprising finding from the 2020s is the smaller number of COVID-19-related articles than I anticipated. A few stand out, including Billy Tusker Haworth's piece on queer community resilience during COVID-19 (Vol 37/1, 2022) and several others with very specific focus: Fitzgerald's early analysis of COVID-19 from an Australian perspective (Vol 35/4, 2020) and Knight's piece on COVID safe aerial firefighting (Vol 35/4, 2020) are examples. However, given the scale of the pandemic, the limited focus on recovery is striking. A book review by John Richardson put words to that absence (Vol 38/3, p.17, 2023):

Recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic seems to be something that has dropped from the imagination or purview of people ... It is very 'old school' thinking, almost akin to 'the bushfires are out, we are done with them, let's just get on with that.

Until the 2020s, reflections of Indigenous knowledge or perspectives throughout AJEM were virtually absent. John Richardson has identified the limited pieces in his high-level

summary articles of the first and second decades of AJEM (Vol 41/1 and Vol 41/2, 2026), and it isn't until the 2020s that we see the inclusion of First Nations perspectives regarding recovery. Bhiemie Williamson and Jessica Weir's piece reports on the systemic exclusion of Indigenous perspectives in disaster practice, policy, and research, with a clear call for change (Vol 36/4, 2021). Kylie Radel et al. offer an analysis of how the incorporation of First Nations knowledges into disaster management policy is tracking to the Sendai Framework, finding recommended targets are not being met (Vol 38/2, 2023). 2025 saw the first Indigenous-focused edition of AJEM, with all articles being either led or co-led by First Nations people, marking a significant shift in the way Indigenous knowledges have been represented in AJEM (Vol 40/2, 2025).

Gender-focused editions in 2022 and 2024 extended the discussion and information available to the sector, including an increased focus on a more holistic understanding of gender and disasters, and more articles about gender in relation to preparedness, response and disaster workforces rather than a predominant focus on recovery seen in previous decades.

Stephanie Alexander's analysis of the implications of the 2023 Strategic Defence Review for Australian disaster management outlines the Australian Defence Force (ADF) position that it must prioritise its core function of warfighting rather than serving as a domestic recovery agency (Vol 38/3, 2023). This analysis can be read as a companion piece to Michael Eburn's earlier commentary on the 2019-2020 Royal Commission and the Australian Constitution where he discusses the hasty changes the Australian Government legislated (prior to the release

of the Royal Commission findings) regarding how the ADF can be activated in response or recovery, which offered one of the most underrated lines in the history of AJEM (Vol 36/1, p.9, 2021):

We may see the ADF as de facto 'spontaneous volunteers'; an organisation (albeit well trained and resourced) that turns up in an emergency area with its own priorities and command arrangements.

One of the standout recovery articles for me in recent years is the research report from Mehmet Ulubasoglu (Vol 35/4, 2020) on the uneven distribution of financial burden after disasters. This research identified which workers are most likely to bear income losses, who may benefit, and how recovery funding can inadvertently worsen these disparities. These findings are important but have yet to be meaningfully reflected in Australian recovery policy.

Themes

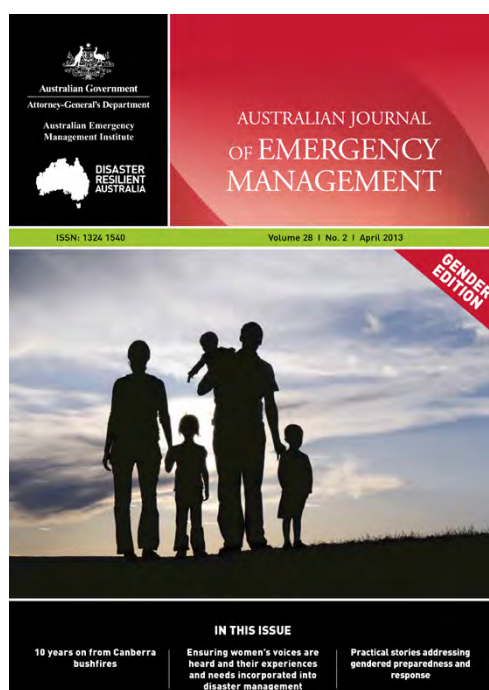
While I didn't set out to look at themes specifically across the 40 years, there were 2 that persistently presented themselves: how gender and collective trauma events are discussed over the decades.

Gender

One of the striking patterns when reading these articles in a concentrated way across decades is the representation of gender over time. In the 1980s, with a few notable exceptions (Ruth Wraith, all-star contributor, I'm looking at you), women are rarely mentioned, let alone present as active contributors. This imbalance is paraded in the first edition of 1990, which names 22 men and 8 navy ships but only 2 women. When tables of contents appear in the early 1990s, the disparity becomes easier to spot: for instance, only 2 of the 4 1992 editions include any articles authored by women.

Volume 8 Issue 4 (1993) is where we see the first substantial discussions of gender and disasters. The article titled 'Special needs of women in emergency situations' is a difficult read (Vol 8/4, 1993). Featuring helpful tips for emergency managers about how to support disaster-affected women are to wear 'recycled underpants' and dispose of soiled goods (as opposed to the disaster-affected men, who just tend to 'get on with it', apparently unbothered by the ownership status of their underpants), with one mention of gendered violence, it makes the changes that have happened since then feel more enlightened and substantive than they should.

The same issue featured the first discussion of family violence by Jan Williams, naming the issue and identifying 3 tiers of service response (Vol 8/4, 1993). The piece is



insightful and important, but reading it made me feel incredibly angry. When Deb Parkinson and Claire Zara, and subsequently GAD Pod (now Gender and Disaster Australia) contributed their research after Black Saturday demonstrating the increased frequency and intensity of family violence that women and children were experiencing in fire-affected communities (Vol 28/2, 2013), it was very much treated by the sector as entirely new information. While I am in no way disputing how important Parkinson and Zara's Black Saturday research was (and is), Williams's article shows this issue had been identified decades earlier but ignored and that is an ugly stain for the sector to reckon with.

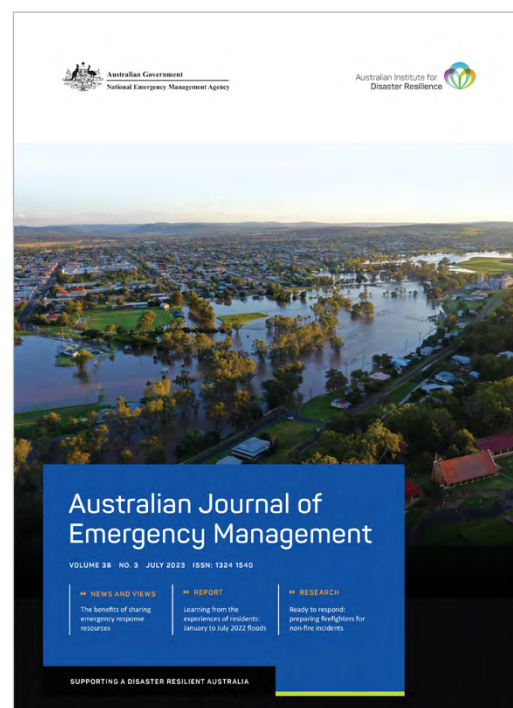
Until the 2020s, where gender is increasingly better integrated across emergency management topics, articles focusing on gender were mostly confined to recovery. This remained puzzling to me until I read Andrade and Lindsay's piece on gender workforce equality reporting, documenting overall improvement but nonetheless bleak results in AFAC member organisations (Vol 38/3, 2023). Taken together, we can see the problem more obviously after disasters because these effects are the results of failure to integrate gender before and during disasters. This gap is either reflective of, or driven by, a lack of diversity among those shaping disaster planning and decision making.

Collective trauma events

Another thing that stood out for me was the way collective trauma events have been represented over the years. In the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s, there were several articles focused on these events, including a range of perspectives about the Kempsey bus crash, an eyewitness account from Tiananmen Square, the Thredbo landslide, Operation Safe Haven, the anniversary of the Tasman Bridge collapse and a number of heartfelt pieces about the Port Arthur shootings. These topics are handled thoughtfully and squarely from a perspective that supporting communities after these events is core work for emergency managers, given their profound impacts on the Australian community. This stood out to me in contrast to how these events are often discussed today, with a stronger operational focus and questions about whether the hazard type fits in emergency management or belongs elsewhere, despite the profound effects on the Australian community.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude by saying that I found the experience of reviewing approximately 160 editions of AJEM a delight, but the truth is that I found it an existentially gruelling exercise. The hardest part for me to grapple with is the concept of progress. I think the way recovery has been discussed in AJEM has changed over time. What saddens me is that despite the excellence, energy and determination of so many articles from the



1980s and 1990s, we are not seeing consistent reports of excellent outcomes and good practice as the rule today. I don't pretend that they were the 'good old days', but it's confronting to see the blueprint laid out decades ago still struggling to be implemented today. Why do the issues described by Margery Webster from 1983 feel so relevant and predictable today? Is the frustration I feel about this specific to recovery, or is it something historians have learned to live with?

A crude overview of recovery in AJEM from me would read something along the following lines: in the 1980s, there was a lot of information provision; the 1990s featured arguments for systemic good practice; the 2000s were mostly about refining program approaches and recently, there has been a theme of reporting about systems and systems failures.

As we move into the next decade, if all the corollary predictions are accurate, what we think of as recovery will largely be dead. In an era of permacrisis, living with layered disaster impacts will become the norm, without the breathing space for people, communities, environments or economies to fully recover. But we're still delivering inconsistent, short-term programs in ways that could fit effectively into the descriptions from the 1990s. The cynic in me predicts that the following decade will see reporting on reduced service provision, discussions of fiscal responsibility and a narrowing of what the emergency management sector see as their mandate. The optimist in me says that we'll see a decade of debate and challenge, where we see a broader range of perspectives centring the impacts of disasters. I hope the 2066 review reports the optimist was right.