

Bushfire CRC Update

→ Understanding the volunteer

Researchers are looking into the recruitment and retention of volunteer fire fighters.

▶ Australia has about 250,000 volunteer firefighters but for the past 30 years memberships have been declining. Fire agencies fear that a looming shortage of volunteer firefighters may degrade the provision of fire services.

The Bushfire CRC is carrying out joint research with fire agencies from around Australia looking at the issues in both recruiting and retaining volunteers. Volunteers have been an integral part of the operations of fire agencies for many years but empirical research is sparse, not in-depth, and largely confined to the last decade.

The areas identified as needing more research include those involving female volunteers, employers of volunteers, families of volunteers, the loss of new recruits and community knowledge of volunteer fire services.

RESEARCH CASE STUDY

In one current study, the Volunteerism Project Team was commissioned by NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) Volunteer Relations Branch and Region West to survey the community on a range of issues.

All households in 29 communities throughout Region West were surveyed by an anonymous questionnaire - 1200 questionnaires were returned. This research focuses on the 1046 respondents who had never been members of RFS or its predecessors.

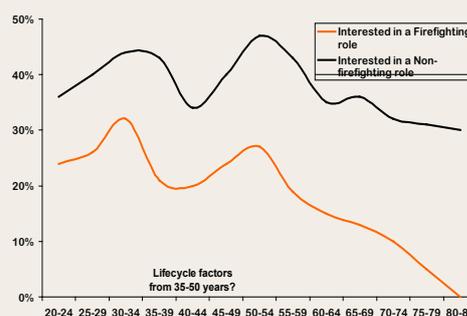
OUTCOMES

Interest in volunteering

20% of respondents expressed interest in volunteering with RFS in a firefighting role, while 40% expressed interest in a non-firefighting role.



▶ ABOVE: NSW RURAL FIRE SERVICE.



THE RESEARCH FOUND THAT PEOPLE AGED 35-50 ARE 1/3 LESS INTERESTED IN VOLUNTEERING: PROBABLY DUE TO FAMILY, CAREER OR HOMEMAKING COMMITMENTS.

Likelihood of volunteering

Only about 1/3 of those expressing interest thought it was likely that they would actually volunteer to join RFS in the next 12 months.

Gender

Of those likely to volunteer for a firefighting role, 65% were male and 35% were female.

Of those likely to volunteer for a non-firefighting role, 40% were male and 60% were female.

Barriers to volunteering

- Lack of time (50%)
- Other priorities (45%)
- Sick / disabled / too old (35%)
- Various fears and concerns (30%)
- Child care (25%)
- Don't need a local fire brigade (17%)

Early recommendations

- Inform the community more about why fire services are needed and the advantages of volunteer fire services.
- Minimise the time imposition on volunteer firefighters.
- Aim for brigade memberships large enough to allow adequate redundancy for turnouts.
- Inform the community about measures to mitigate harm or financial loss to volunteers.
- Help brigades become more female-friendly.
- Help institute child-care arrangements for volunteers.

→ ABOUT THE PROJECT

Jim McLennan and Adrian Birch from the School of Psychological Science at La Trobe University are with the Bushfire CRC project D3 Enhancing Volunteerism.