RECRUITING AND RETAINING VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTERS IN AUSTRALASIA

AN INTEGRATIVE SUMMARY OF RESEARCH (SYNOPSIS)

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INTRODUCTION

This report summarises the findings of Australia's largest-ever research project investigating the recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters, conducted by the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre (Bushfire CRC) Volunteerism Project Team between 2003 and 2010. This Project has identified a great many factors that inhibit or enhance fire service volunteerism.

The report addresses three aspects of sustaining adequate numbers:

  (a)   the level of participation of current volunteers;

  (b)   means of retaining volunteers, and

  (c)   more effective recruitment of suitable volunteers.

The issues investigated were examined in different studies, using various methodologies and categories of respondents. The research team completed a total of 28 studies with and for volunteer-based fire agencies throughout Australasia.

Volunteer-based fire agencies report three basic problems:

  (a)   declining numbers of volunteers over the two decades to 2004;

  (b)   difficulty getting adequate numbers of volunteers to turn out during normal business hours; and

  (c)   static or declining and ageing populations in small, rural communities.

A summary of the salient findings from the large body of data gathered by the 28 studies is presented in this synopsis, with a brief introduction to the major sections given below. The term volunteer, unless otherwise specified, is used to refer to people joining a fire brigade and donating their time for no financial payment.

TRENDS IN VOLUNTEER NUMBERS

It is accepted that declines in volunteer numbers are related to long-term economic trends, but research has indicated that more abrupt economic changes, most notably economic restructuring from the late 1970s brought about in response to high rates of both inflation and unemployment, have contributed to the considerable decline in volunteer numbers. Victoria's Country Fire Authority (CFA) data suggest volunteer numbers appear to have levelled off since 2006 but this stabilisation is likely to be geographically variable, and many brigades are still likely to struggle to maintain numbers. The likely continuation of economic restructuring means agencies need to be conscious of the effectiveness of their recruitment and retention strategies, and plan to counter further declines in volunteer numbers.

LEVEL OF PARTICIPATION OF CURRENT VOLUNTEERS

Fire agencies report problems with volunteers being available to participate in all aspects of their role, including training and non-operational activities. The most frequently reported constraint to participation is the competing demands of work and business, exacerbated by the high proportion of volunteers who are in the labour force relative to the general population. Further, a disproportionately high number of volunteers are self-employed and report attending a much higher proportion of turnouts during business hours than do employed volunteers, often to the detriment of their business or farm.

RETENTION OF CURRENT VOLUNTEERS

Most volunteers leave because of moving from the area, demands of work and family, old-age or ill health, or dissatisfaction with the volunteering experience. Dissatisfaction most commonly relates to a poor organisational climate in the brigade and is perhaps the problem most able to be addressed by agencies. Interventions to improve the volunteer management skills of paid officers and the brigade leadership skills of volunteer leaders will reduce resignations, improve recruitment and participation, and save costs incurred owing to unnecessary turnover.

RECRUITMENT OF NEW VOLUNTEERS

Overall, men were more interested in operational firefighting than were women, and rural women were more willing to volunteer than their town and suburban counterparts. People in the 35–50-year age group are least willing to consider fire service volunteering.

SOCIAL CONTEXT

Australia has a small population of 22 million people distributed across a continent of 7.7 million km^2, giving it the seventh lowest population density on Earth. In order to ensure rapid response times, firefighters must be distributed throughout populated areas including lightly populated rural communities. Without volunteers, many regional communities would have to depend on brigades from regional cities – with longer travel times – for fire protection. Australia's large numbers of volunteer firefighters offer an invaluable surge capacity of trained personnel, essential in a country so prone to bushfires.

Evidence suggests that volunteer fire brigades not only offer protection, but in many cases enrich their communities by promoting interaction and mutual good will. This is encompassed in the idea of 'social capital', which may be bridging (inclusive) or bonding (exclusive). Bridging social capital involves outward-looking connections that extend across diverse social divisions (e.g. race, ethnicity, age, income) while bonding social capital involves inward-looking connections, which tend to strengthen exclusive identities and homogeneous groups (e.g., exclusive business clubs).

The Volunteerism Project found that there is evidence of brigades tending to exhibit either bridging or bonding social capital. The fact that, in many studies, members of rural communities reported that they had little knowledge about their local brigade suggests that some brigades can be insular (bonding social capital) rather than a source of bridging social capital. Furthermore, in several studies, significant proportions of respondents (both serving and ex-volunteers) reported feeling excluded by the brigade, and this had reduced their enthusiasm for participation, or had led them to resign.

Various approaches have been used to estimate the economic value of volunteer firefighters' contributions. This was estimated at $480 million annually for the CFA's 60,000 volunteers in 2003 and $840 million in 2009, greatly exceeding the CFA's annual expenditure of about $300 million, and making the average annual contribution of a CFA volunteer about $14,000. Extending these estimates nationally suggests that Australia's 218,000 volunteer firefighters contribute about $3 billion annually to the national economy.

POPULATION TRENDS

The number of available volunteers is affected by population trends. Overall, Australia's population is growing at a rate of 1.7% per annum. In 2009, ~40% of that growth rate was due to natural increase (births minus deaths), with the remainder made up of net overseas migration. About one quarter of Australia's population was born overseas. In remote areas of Australia, rural decline and fluctuations in the mining industry have caused declines in overall population.

Overall, Australia's population is highly urbanised, with about two thirds of the population residing in capital cities. In rural Australia, agriculture has been subject to a long-term trend of declining terms of trade[1], which together with drought and soil degradation have contributed to a long-term trend of population decline and an increase in age profile. Thus shortages in the numbers of people available to volunteer, and the relative

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[1] The ratio of the prices farmers get for their produce over the costs of production (e.g. labour, fuel and fertiliser)

deficiency of adults aged less than 40, has created the most difficult recruitment and retention challenges for fire agencies.

FIRE AGENCY ORGANISATION

The volunteer-based fire agencies in each state or territory in Australia and in New Zealand have evolved along different pathways. At present, each has different responsibilities in terms of rural and urban fires and a range of other incident types.

Data on the make-up of Australia's volunteer fire services are sparse, of variable quality, and of limited historical extent. It is difficult to obtain accurate data about the capacity and capability of the volunteer fire service, as volunteer-based fire agencies have historically found it difficult keep accurate records of the numbers of volunteers. The reasons may include: the very large number of volunteers and brigades; their wide geographic dispersal across the nation; difficulties with record-keeping and reporting; and infrequent fires in small communities, making it difficult to tell which brigade members are active. CFA data (the CFA has one of the most reliable historical data sets of membership numbers) suggest that there was a dramatic fall in volunteer numbers during the 1980s. Also, accredited volunteers who are listed as operational may be inactive, and in one study, brigade chiefs reported that in some brigades, a dedicated few volunteers shoulder most of the workload.

The numbers of volunteers in each of the three largest fire agencies are large and comparable with the number of employees in Australia's largest corporations. Management of such large volunteer numbers presents challenges in communication and consultation; volunteers are not subject to the same level of control as paid employees, and not dependent on the fire service for income. In some respects, volunteers are free to leave at will, and allowed wide latitude in the extent of their participation.

VOLUNTEER GENDER, AGE AND COUNTRY OF ORIGIN PROFILES

The gender breakdown of respondents in most of the Volunteerism Project's studies is consistent with fire agencies' data, suggesting that 15–20% of volunteer firefighters are female. The predominance of males in firefighting participation contrasts strongly with their participation in general volunteering; in Australia in 2006, 32% of men and 36% of women participated across all forms of volunteering. The proportions of each gender undertaking operational roles in the CFA are consistent with findings from the Project's studies of community attitudes to fire service volunteering, which showed that about 60% of men and 40% of women were interested in operational firefighting roles.

The age profile of volunteer firefighters is skewed towards late middle age (40–60 years) relative to the Australian population. Given the sometimes strenuous demands of firefighting, the distribution towards higher age groups may elevate health risks to volunteer firefighters and reduce the overall physical capabilities of the firefighting force. A deficiency of young adults in volunteering is seen throughout Australia, a trend that is likely to continue to grow. Birth rates in Australia have been declining since the 1970s and younger adults have a lower propensity to volunteer owing to modern economic and social pressures. In rural communities, there are fewer young people owing to migration to larger population centres for education and work.

The proportion of young Australians participating in post-compulsory and tertiary education has been increasing since the 1970s and the Australian Government announced a major policy initiative in 2009 to further increase the rate of attainment of bachelor degrees. There is evidence of a relationship between higher education and volunteer firefighter numbers, and fire agencies would benefit from developing a better understanding and confirmation of this apparent relationship to assist with workforce planning in the future. Downward pressure on volunteer firefighter numbers and upward pressure on their age distribution should be anticipated by fire agencies given the impact that past expansion of higher education appears to have had on volunteer firefighter numbers since the 1970s.

Immigrants, particularly those from non English-speaking countries, are under-represented among firefighting volunteers, largely because they tend to settle in major cities. In terms of country of origin, one study of volunteer firefighters found that, of the 9% of respondents born outside Australia, 81% came from English-speaking regions. Volunteers from non English-speaking regions are under-represented by a factor of three on average, while volunteers from Asia are markedly under-represented by a factor of ten compared with their proportion in the Australian population. While low English language skills appear to be the main factor preventing migrants from volunteering, other factors such as cultural traditions, limited integration or perceptions of not being welcome in local brigades, also appear to play a role in determining participation. There are limited data on the participation of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders in the volunteer fire services.

VOLUNTEER ROLES

A study asking volunteers what functions they performed in the fire service found 95% of respondents reported firefighter functions while 34.8% reported administrative functions. Clearly, most respondents performing a firefighting function are also performing other roles. The high proportion of respondents endorsing firefighter as a role is somewhat at odds with the proportion of firefighters who are reported as operational across the fire services; the proportions reported by fire agencies vary from 48 to 69%. It may be that most volunteers identify as firefighters even if they are not accredited as operational. This may provide a useful insight into the motivation of non-operational volunteers: they may perceive it as desirable to identify with the role and/or title of firefighter.

In contrast, a study of people who were not fire services volunteers found these were twice as likely to express interest in a non-firefighting role as a firefighting role, suggesting that there are untapped resources in the community.

LIMITATIONS TO PARTICIPATION OF CURRENT VOLUNTEERS

A survey of serving volunteer firefighters found that about 85% were in the labour force. Sixty-two per cent of respondents (73% of respondents in the labour force) identified the competing demands of work or business as a greatly or moderately limiting their participation in volunteering. However, in attempting to balance the demands of volunteering and work, respondents are less likely to blame the demands of volunteering and more likely to blame those of work or business.

Perceptions of the bureaucratic nature of the fire services are also among the foremost factors limiting participation in fire service activities, endorsed as greatly or moderately limiting their participation by 59% of respondents. There appears to be a systemic tension between the generosity of the volunteers and the accountability-conscious fire agencies that support and control them.

About half the respondents identified as greatly or moderately limiting their participation three factors referring to demands on volunteers by fire services: increased complexity of fire service activities, increased demands of training requirements and overall time demands.

About 40% of respondents reported brigade politics as a great or moderate limiting factor, suggesting that the fire services may benefit from addressing issues of organisational climate among their volunteers. Similar percentages endorsed out-of-pocket expenses, and parenting and family activities as limiting their participation.

About 30% of respondents indicated that a lack of resources provided by the fire service limited their participation. Perceptions of inadequate resourcing may undermine morale and in so doing erode retention and recruitment. Relatively few respondents (20%) reported losing interest in the fire service and the risk of legal action as limitations. Health problems ranked as the second-lowest of 16 suggested factors limiting participation, endorsed by 15% of respondents and only 7% of respondents endorsed 'I'm finding some incidents too distressing to attend', making it the lowest ranked limiting factor.

The main limitation nominated to turning out was the distance of work or home relative to the fire station. Relatively few respondents (5%) reported financial costs to themselves or their employer as a limitation and very few respondents (1%) expressed fears of dismissal or discrimination from their employers.

Factors volunteers felt would make it easier to turn out during working hours were (in order of frequency of selection) the ability to respond faster to their fire station, changes to their working arrangements and if their employer had a better appreciation of the rationale for the volunteer fire service.

AGE AND FITNESS

Concerns have been raised that Occupational Health and Safety (OH&S) considerations might some day require volunteer fire agencies to introduce mandatory fitness standards for operational volunteers. Given the sometimes strenuous demands of firefighting, the volunteer age distribution towards higher age groups may both elevate health risks to volunteer firefighters and reduce the overall physical capabilities of the firefighting force.

Currently, only the ACT Emergency Services Authority (ACT ESA) has mandatory fitness standards for its operational volunteer firefighters. Given the possibility that other fire services might some day feel the need to introduce mandatory fitness standards, a study was conducted contrasting volunteers' age distribution information from ACT ESA with the age distribution of another fire agency to generate estimates of the likely impact on volunteer numbers of applying the this fitness standard.. This rudimentary analysis suggested that shortfalls in recruiting younger volunteers and forced retirements of older volunteers would result in a decrease in numbers of 40% of the current female operational volunteers and 33.5% of the current male operational volunteers. Thus, introducing mandatory fitness standards would almost certainly have a negative effect on agencies' current attempts to maintain adequate numbers of volunteers. Initiatives to minimise the impact involve increasing targeting of younger volunteers, increasing current volunteer fitness levels and considering using non-operational volunteers for certain roles.

FACTORS INCREASING EASE OF PARTICIPATION

The highest-ranked item in a survey of factors increasing ease of participation was the ability to catch-up on missed training or assessments at neighbouring brigades (rated by 63% of respondents). This is consistent with other findings that show that unpredictable competing time commitments are among the greatest problems reported by respondents.

The next most highly ranked factor was a need for the volunteers' role to be better explained to employers. Only 64% of employed volunteers reported having an understanding with their employer about when they can take time off work for volunteering. We suggest that such understandings are essential to maintaining good relationships between employers, employees and the fire service. Two studies found that ~5% of volunteers are not permitted to take time off work to respond with the fire service, and ~32% of volunteers say they do not have a clear understanding with their employer about taking time off work. It may be in the interests of the fire services to bridge this communication gap with an information campaign targeted at employers and including a sample agreement between volunteers and their employers. Two-thirds of respondents felt a sample agreement provided by the fire service would be useful.

In contrast, a survey of employers showed just 11% of them reported having formal leave provisions in place, and only 16% thought they would benefit from help in drafting leave provisions for fire service volunteering. While these percentages seem to be low, Australia's volunteer firefighters constitute only 2% of the 10 million persons in the labour force, so the probability that an employer has an employee who is a volunteer firefighter is low and tends to be concentrated in regional areas. However, it would be constructive if all employers were aware of sample leave arrangements for times when they engage an employee who is a volunteer.

Improving brigade leadership to increase ease of participation was supported by about 48% of respondents in a survey of volunteers. The latter may be addressed by increasing or perhaps mandating leadership training for aspiring brigade leaders. The issue of disharmony in brigades emerged repeatedly during the project. Poor brigade climate and leadership were the most frequently cited reasons for dissatisfaction with the volunteering experience. Less strongly rated factors included (in order of importance): not having to leave their own homes or families unprotected, reducing the time commitments for brigade activities, and catering better to the volunteer or their family's specific requirements.

VOLUNTEERING AND WORK OR BUSINESS

The factor most frequently endorsed as limiting volunteer participation across our studies is the competing demands of work or business. One study found that 85% of survey respondents were in the labour force, compared with about 62% of the state population aged 15 years and over. This finding is consistent with the fact that many determinants of peoples' ability to participate in the labour force, such as being physically able and mentally alert, also influence whether they can participate in firefighting. However, brigades may inadvertently reinforce membership from certain sectors. For example, the scheduling of training and meetings in the evenings may suit people who work during 9 to 5 office hours but less so shift workers, or women with school-aged children who are available during week days .

Volunteer participation according to work status was surveyed in one study. The ratio of full-time to part-time employees was much higher among respondents (5:1) than among the labour force (2.5:1), indicating that people in full-time employment are twice as likely to volunteer as those in part-time employment, relative to their proportion in the labour force.

Of the women respondents who ticked 'home duties' as an occupation, 71% were also employed or business owners, potentially challenging traditional notions that women may be available for turnouts during the day. Likewise, almost 80% of student respondents were also employed, indicating limited time or capacity for fire service activities. Thus women and students, two of the main potential sources of volunteers below retirement age, may be limited in availability. There may however be opportunities for recruitment, for example, among parents whose children are older and retired people who are still in good health.

In terms of attendance to callouts during working hours, one study showed ~30% of employed volunteers do not attend any callouts during working hours, 25% attend ~10% of callouts and the remaining 50% attend between 11% and 100%, with 4% of these attending all callouts.

For self-employed business- and farm-owner volunteers, the median percentage of callouts they reported attending during business hours was 80%, far higher than the 10–25% employees report. However, caution should be exercised in interpreting these findings, as self-employed respondents may have a broader concept of working hours, extending well beyond a 35- or 40-hour week.

The proportion of serving female volunteers reporting that parenting commitments were limiting to their volunteering (53%) was slightly higher than for males (45%) and there were no differences between the genders regarding family commitments other than parenting. Generally, it appears that parenting commitments have a moderate impact on time given overall. Higher proportions of respondents with children younger than 5 years reported adverse impacts than those with older children. A minority of respondents indicated notable negative impacts on family life (~17%) (e.g. limited time spent with family, restricted contribution to household responsibilities). Rather, respondents reported mainly positive impacts (58–70%), including those associated with becoming more involved with other families, and social activities through the fire service.

Full-time-employed respondents were proportionally most likely to report negative impacts on family, generally. It may be that full-time workers experience greater impacts on family life because of the time demands and limited flexibility of full-time work, meaning that for them, volunteering is then additional to high demands from relatively inflexible employment.

VOLUNTEER RETENTION

A survey of serving volunteers showed that only about 3% reported having resigned and rejoined, supporting the importance of strategies to improve rates of retention of volunteers. In 2004, Australian volunteer fire agencies reported that gross loss rates of volunteers ranged between 6 and 13% per annum, with a mean loss rate of 8%, and a replacement cost calculated at ~$12.5 million per annum.

In a survey of ex-volunteers, the major reasons[2] reported for having left were work or family commitments (51%; most significant in the 35–44 year-old age group), moving out of the district (38%; most significant in the 18–34 year-old age group) and poor health or old-age (28%; most significant in the 45+ year-old age group). About 25% of respondents nominated dissatisfaction with aspects of their volunteering experience, particularly: the perceived bureaucratic nature of the fire service, the increased complexity of fire service activities, and the increased time commitments required by the fire service. There were no significant differences among the three age groups or gender in likelihood of resigning for dissatisfaction reasons. While fire agencies can do little to address reasons for leaving such as work or family commitments there may be measures that fire agencies can take to address the causes of generalised dissatisfaction.

Of six potential causes of dissatisfaction suggested to respondents in the questionnaire the most important were unhappiness with brigade (or higher-level) management and feeling excluded from brigade activities. Reports of respondents feeling excluded from brigade activities are consistent with the exclusionary behaviours characteristic of bonding forms of social capital.

Respondents were invited to write describing what they had enjoyed least while volunteering. The most frequent dislikes (25%) involved poor brigade climate owing to conflicts, factionalism, exclusion and bullying. Other dislikes, each described by about 15% of respondents, included: poor brigade leadership associated with autocratic style, favouritism and incompetence; excessive time commitments or time wasted during operations; excessive bureaucracy and anxiety about attending critical incidents, particular motor vehicle accidents.

INTENTION TO REMAIN

Of the experiences related to volunteer retention, the level of intention to remain was strongly linked with positive feelings about being a fire service volunteer, and somewhat less strongly linked with level of benefits gained from being a volunteer.

The feeling of contributing to protecting members of the community and the benefits of broadening of social networks and feeling included were linked significantly to high levels of intention to remain, as was finding membership as rewarding as expected and having troublesome members dealt with promptly. Volunteers who found membership rewarding tended to be those who reported good brigade leadership and a good relationship between the brigade and other emergency response agencies.

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[2] Respondents could nominate more than one reason, so the sum of the percentages is greater than 100%.

Important negative factors included: being a reluctant volunteer in the first place; lack of confidence in the safety of drivers; delays in receiving results following training assessments; and conflict between the time demands of training and turning out and other activities, especially study.

The main reason reported for remaining is the opinion that 'The fire service has an important function to perform', with 82% of respondents reporting that they strongly agree. The second-highest ranked reason for remaining is enjoying most aspects of the fire service. A much lower proportion (38%) reported they remain to protect their home and assets. Respondents whose partners were in the fire service were evenly divided as to whether that was an incentive for remaining. When questioned about remaining because 'there is no-one else in the community to take their place', 46% disagreed and 34% agreed.

WOMEN VOLUNTEERS

Around 2004, the percentage of women volunteer firefighters in Australian agencies ranged from about 11% to 20%. A 2005 report identified that women volunteers felt both isolated and sidelined, and the findings from 51 volunteer focus groups by CFA noted that 'In many cases, brigades were viewed as 'boys clubs' or 'cliques'.

Percentages of women responding that they were very likely still to be with the fire service in 12 months was appreciably lower in three studies compared with high percentages of men. Most male firefighters felt accepted (91%) compared with 76% of female firefighters, and conversely, while 2% of men indicated that they were not entirely accepted, the figure was 17% for women.

Whereas 6.6% of men indicated experiencing discrimination, 13.9% of women did so, and while 16% of women indicated they had experienced discrimination or harassment, only 5% of men had. Taken together, the responses suggest that women in Australia's fire services are two to three times more likely to experience discrimination than are their male counterparts. There was no evidence of a gender difference in either bullying (9.4% of women vs. 10.0% of men) or harassment (7.5% of women vs. 8.0% of men).

For women leaders, 17% experienced discrimination, 20% bullying, and 19% harassment. In contrast, the corresponding figures for male leaders were 6, 6, and 7%. Women who take on leadership positions appear to be twice as likely to experience bullying and harassment and are more likely to respond by leaving.

Other evidence that women volunteers are treated differently from their male counterparts, often early in their service, is seen in three studies that found almost twice as many women (20%) than men (12%) indicated that they had not received induction information.

Both men and women in non-operational roles were more likely to have not received induction information; thus the overall gender differences do not appear to be due to the higher percentage of women in non-operational positions. This raises serious questions not only about the extent to which women in non-operational roles are counted as important members with a significant role to play, but about the extent to which they are adequately briefed about OH&S issues.

Furthermore, two out of the three surveys provide evidence that the perception of not having received this information is related to lower intentions of continuing to volunteer.

RELATIONSHIP WITH FIRE SERVICE MANAGERS

In a survey of serving volunteers, while the majority of respondents reported favourably about their relationships with fire agency managerial staff, between 20% and 40% of respondents reported unfavourably across at least some of the questionnaire items. The most frequent negative response was that fire agency staff failed to consult the respondent's brigade before making decisions that affected it.

When asked for written comments about their relationship with managerial staff, about a quarter of the respondents commented and there were 6 times more *negative* than *positive* comments. The most frequent groupings of complaint were that some managerial staff members were seen as: autocratic, dictatorial, uncommunicative, rude and tending to look down on volunteers; or ineffective, incompetent, inefficient or over-worked.

VOLUNTEER RECRUITMENT

There is both anecdotal and concrete evidence of a surge in membership inquiries and new recruits following large fires. While this might seem to be self-evident, it is equally plausible that rates of recruitment drop following a severe fire season owing to heightened fear of injury or death. Volunteers who join in surge years have been found to be approximately as persistent in their membership as those who join in non-surge years, thus refuting anecdotal evidence that they are more sensation-oriented and more prone to moving on if further large bushfires do not eventuate.

The most frequent joining age in one study was 16 years, suggesting that young people are enthusiastic to join as soon as they can. The rate of joining declines sharply from the age of 18 years and fluctuates around a constant rate until the age of 65 before declining with increasing age. The most frequent ages of joining are in early adulthood and the median age of joining is 40 years.

Overall, studies found that individuals are motivated to become volunteer firefighters by a mix of desire to contribute to the community, fire safety concerns, and enlightened self-interest. In relation to age-related motivations, the data suggest that self-oriented motivations (career advancement, skills development, new challenges and friendship opportunities) were more important on average for the 18–34-year age group, but volunteers in this age group were nevertheless just as motivated by perceived safety concerns and community needs, on average, as were those in older age groups. This may simply result from life-cycle factors: people aged 18–34 years are more likely to be in the early stages of career and friendship network development.

These findings suggest that potential volunteer firefighters aged 18–34 years are somewhat more likely than older potential volunteers to be attracted by the personal benefits resulting from fire service volunteering, implying that fire services wishing to attract younger volunteers should employ a recruiting strategy that emphasizes the personal benefits likely to accrue to the volunteer, but not at the expense of the motives of contributing to community safety and community development, however.

PEOPLE WHO HAVE NEVER VOLUNTEERED

In a survey of people who have never volunteered with a fire service, ~40% of respondents expressed interest in volunteering in a specialist, non-firefighting role, and ~20% were interested in a firefighting role. About one third of those who expressed interest in either role thought it likely that they would volunteer within the next

12 months. In other words, only one sixth of respondents who expressed interest in fire service volunteering thought there was some likelihood of volunteering for an operational role within 12 months. Men were twice as likely as women to actually volunteer for firefighting roles. Women seemed to perceive greater barriers in translating an interest in volunteering into a likelihood of joining. The level of interest in volunteering in relation to age appeared to reflect lifecycle factors, such as parenting, studying, and work.

There appears to be a relationship between being employed and expressing interest in or likelihood of volunteering, especially in a firefighting role, probably because the same considerations that prevent people working may prevent them volunteering. Interest in volunteering in a non-firefighting role varied appreciably among occupation groups; labourers and related workers were least likely to be interested (32%), while sales and personal services workers were most likely to be interested (56%).

When asked what benefits potential volunteers thought they might derive, the benefit most frequently endorsed was 'the chance to put something back into the community' (75%). Equivalent, pro-community items are consistently the highest-ranked motivations in surveys of volunteer firefighters. The next two ranked items, making a difference and learning new skills, were each endorsed by about 70% of respondents. Between 50 and 60% of respondents endorsed a range of more pragmatic motives including: getting involved in the community; making up for a genuine shortage of volunteers; motivation to keep fit; pride in being a fire service volunteer; and meeting new people.

The prospect of excitement ranked fairly moderately (37.4%); a similar proportion of respondents thought volunteering could help them get qualifications that would benefit their career. The least valued benefit (14.3%) was to help start a career as a paid firefighter.

There is good consistency between the ranking of motivations endorsed by people who have never been firefighters and that endorsed by volunteers after their first 6 months of service, a noteworthy factor given the two relevant studies were carried out in different states. As might be anticipated, many motivations were more strongly endorsed by the recruits.

Lack of time and competing priorities were the main barriers to volunteering nominated in the study of people who had never volunteered. The most frequently nominated barrier (49% of respondents) was the unpredictable nature of their own commitments, followed closely by lack of spare time after work or family commitments (45%). Similarly, 44% identified the barrier as being a question of priorities. Respondents tended to identify time shortage in terms of their own lack of time rather than of excessive time demands imposed by the fire service, and fewer respondents (29%) thought that volunteering takes too much time.

Wanting to be available to protect their own or neighbours' property was cited as a barrier by 41%. This suggests a widespread attitude of a more locally oriented approach to managing fires rather than relying on a community or state-oriented fire service. This self-sufficient attitude may have been reinforced by the so-called 'Stay or Go' policy, which it appears has been interpreted by many people as encouraging them to stay home to protect their properties when there is the threat of wildfire.

About one third of respondents were uninterested or preferred to use their time in other ways, fire agencies can expect to face a difficult, and perhaps unsuccessful, task trying to persuade these people to become involved.

Almost half of the respondents (41%) reported that they could not leave their work, business or farm to attend fires. The fire services may have already tapped into much of the population who have sufficient time and

freedom to volunteer, but it may still be worth educating the community about the benefits of excusing volunteers from work from time to time.

A similar proportion (42%) saw no need to formally join the fire service, endorsing the statement 'If there's a big enough fire, I'll be there to help anyway, so there's no need to join'. This leaves others responsible for maintaining a local fire brigade to respond to everyday incidents. It also raises questions about the preparedness, training and fitness of such spontaneous volunteers, as well as possibly their level of insurance cover if injured while self-deploying in response to a "big enough fire".

Concerns about safety (40%) and possible loss of income (36%) could be overcome by fire services publicising their safety culture and firefighter compensation and income protection arrangements. Publicising non-firefighting roles may increase the levels of interest in the 39% of respondents who felt that they were not suited to the kinds of things they believed firefighters do.

Thirty-eight per cent indicated that they would rather help the fire service by making donations**,** a substantial body of goodwill that the fire service and brigades should actively seek to harness into more active involvement.

Poor health and fitness are barriers to volunteering increasing with age commencing from the low 30's. About one third of respondents indicated that they could not leave their family duties to go to fires; suggesting that facilitating mutual support arrangements within communities could help free such persons for volunteering.

About one third of respondents in the predominantly rural population surveyed did not know the fire service needed more volunteers. This high proportion (one third) is especially worthy of note given that our research has indicated that most brigades in rural populations are facing a shortfall in volunteer numbers. A similar proportion felt they would not find fighting fires enjoyable, suggesting that members of this group could be targeted for non-operational roles. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many current fire service volunteers, particularly in rural areas; do not find fighting fires enjoyable, but rather an onerous necessity for the protection of their own interests/assets.

About 32% of potential recruits were concerned about their legal protection, a fear that could be allayed by the fire services publicising information about the nature of volunteers' liabilities and the legal protections in place.

There was a significant gender difference with regard to finding fire service activities too upsetting, distressing, or frightening, endorsed by of 17% of male respondents compared with 40% of females. Many such respondents may still be comfortable volunteering in non-operational roles, and some may discover operational activities are not as distressing as they feared.

The perception that the fire service was too bureaucratic was held by about 30% of those surveyed who had never volunteered (note: it was the highest-ranked factor nominated as limiting greater participation for serving volunteers in one study). This suggests that serving volunteers discuss their concerns (as well as their satisfactions) quite widely within their host communities, with flow-on effects on recruitment.

Not knowing how to join was cited as a barrier by 28%, representing a sizeable number of potential volunteers who could be targeted by better publicity. Financial hardship was a factor for 27%, and given the impact of drought and other financial stresses on rural communities, it is surprising that this barrier was not more highly ranked.

About one quarter of respondents reported believing that their employer or their family wouldn't be happy

about them attending fires. Child-minding of children under 5 years was cited as the greatest restriction on participation for women. Any fire services initiatives that facilitate child-minding may thus improve the number of female volunteers.

About one quarter of respondents who had never volunteered felt that the fire brigade members should be paid, not volunteers, and about one fifth did not want to take a job away from a paid firefighter. These two findings suggest that the case for relying on volunteers could be better articulated to the wider community. A similar proportion were not prepared to volunteer because they felt state or local government did not sufficiently support the fire service. Research into the specific issues that lead to this negative perception may be useful.

One fifth of respondents who had never volunteered also reported being discouraged from joining by the internal political climate in their local brigade. One fifth felt they would not fit in. Note the findings earlier in the present report that dissatisfaction arising from poor brigade climate, including bullying and discrimination, was a major, avoidable cause of resignations of serving volunteers. Note also the evidence suggesting bonding, i.e. exclusionary, social capital in some brigades. Brigades develop reputations, for good or ill, in their communities such that community members who have never been brigade members acquire their perceptions about the fire service which can affect the recruitment of new members. Respondents' perceptions may have been formed by portrayals in the media or passed on through informal community networks of friends or relatives. These results arguably indicate that a number of brigades have a serious public image problem. Generally, fire agencies may benefit from generating more positive attitudes towards the fire service, and actively seeking to engage those who may feel alienated from the service.

One study of serving volunteers identified a lack of ethnic diversity among volunteers relative to the population, possibly due to the tendency of immigrants to settle in capital city areas where volunteer brigades are less common. The same study also revealed that diversity of membership was the lowest-ranked of a set of 16 values rated by serving volunteers. Brigades may need to cultivate community perceptions that they are friendly places for a wide range of people.

Among the lower-rated barriers to volunteering were working– (20%) or living (17%) too far from the fire station, not realising brigades were made up of volunteers (18%), concerns about out-of-pocket expenses (18%, more strongly endorsed by widowed, divorced or older respondents), the opinion there was no need for a local fire brigade (17%), and lack of transport (11%).

FACTORS MAKING JOINING EASIER

In the study of people who had never volunteered, the most commonly endorsed need was for information sessions, e.g. on how to join, time commitments expected, legal and income protection. Respondents said developing skills that would be useful to them in other areas (57%) or getting qualifications that would help in their career (52%) would make it easier for them to volunteer. A similar proportion (56%) indicated that it would be helpful if intake dates were publicised.

It appears a good deal of the population finds the prospect of joining a fire brigade a little daunting, with 47% of respondents thinking it would be helpful if someone were to introduce them to brigade members, and 38% that it would be helpful if someone were to invite them to volunteer personally. Similarly, about a third indicated that making it easier for friends or family to become involved or some form of child-care assistance would help them to join. Recognition of prior learning was not strongly endorsed (17%), not surprisingly given the survey excluded people who had ever volunteered with a fire service.

Current brigade members are the best ambassadors for recruiting new membership, although inviting friends to join may not come easily to some volunteers, and it may be worth coaching members in these skills. General publicity is also very important in improving the community's understanding of fire service volunteering and fostering favourable community attitudes. Fire services might explore ways of involving families in brigade activities, perhaps broadening the role of brigades to encompass activities such as community education or assisting other organisations with fund-raising.

In terms of contact points, research suggests that younger people are increasingly likely to use web-based materials to make decisions. The CFA found that, once implemented, its on-line volunteer inquiry form became the most popular means of lodging an inquiry, accounting for 55% of inquiries received and confirming the value of websites for volunteer recruitment.

MAJOR ISSUES EMERGING ACROSS THE STUDIES

The major implications that emerge on taking an overview perspective of the findings of the 28 studies are listed below.

A number of initiatives by fire agencies, many based on findings of the Bushfire CRC Volunteerism Project, may have already arrested the decline in volunteer numbers in some areas. However, the population continues to rise in most areas, while volunteer numbers are not showing clear signs of increasing. Further, there are grounds for anticipating more frequent and larger fires in most regions, driven by climate change, and compounded by population shifts including further population declines in most remote regions.

IMPACT OF ECONOMIC CHANGE

The age profile of regional Australia has increased with the exodus of young adults to capital cities, leaving volunteer fire brigades with declining numbers and an age profile undesirably high for the health and well-being of the volunteers, and unattractive to younger potential recruits. Structural economic adjustments, particularly those that gained momentum in the early 1970s, are on-going and will probably continue to negatively affect the volunteer fire services. The effort by governments to increase participation in education, particularly among people living in regional and remote Australia, can be expected to place further pressure on volunteer availability in regional areas.

This significant downward pressure on volunteer numbers, and upward pressure on their age distribution, especially in rural areas, should be anticipated by fire agencies and governments in workforce planning for future demand and to provide surge capacity for larger, more protracted fires, perhaps by targeting people in their early 40s who are established and more likely to remain in the area.

CONFLICT BETWEEN WORK OR BUSINESS AND VOLUNTEERING

The most frequently reported barrier to participation by both serving volunteers and prospective recruits is the competing demands of work and business.

About 85% of volunteer firefighters are members of the labour force. Self-employed volunteers appear to shoulder most of the responsibility for turnouts during business hours, although they constitute only 20% of fire service volunteers. Although most employers report that they are happy for employees to turn out during business hours, that is not the perception of their employees. Infrequent responses for strike teams on hot days can be tolerated in some workplaces, but prolonged commitments to so-called campaign fires are more difficult.

As a result, a disproportionate share of the burden of providing a fire service during business hours is carried by a minority of self-employed volunteers, and employers who are willing to spare their employees and absorb the disruption and cost. This appears to be an inequitable shifting of cost from the community to a minority of individuals and businesses.

NEED FOR INCREASED SUPPORT FOR BRIGADE LEADERS

The main reasons given for resigning from fire services are utilitarian (work for family commitments, leaving the area, age and ill health) which are beyond the control of the fire agencies. However, ~25% of volunteers leave for reasons of dissatisfaction owing to: the perceived bureaucratic nature of the fire service, the increased complexity of fire service activities, and the increased time commitments required by the fire service. Their most frequently cited dislikes related to: poor brigade climate manifesting as conflict, factionalism, exclusion and bullying; and poor brigade leadership manifesting as autocratic style, favouritism and incompetence.

These dysfunctional behaviours are symptomatic of poor brigade leadership and a lack of adequate oversight by fire agency managers responsible for those brigades. Current brigade leaders report that they often received little preparation for the role from their predecessors or the fire agencies, and focus groups indicated that potential leaders are often deterred by the observed workload.

There is evidence that some fire agency managers in head or regional offices, who are responsible for managing and supporting individual brigades, are not well regarded by brigade members, and an appreciable proportion of respondents complained that some managers were either incompetent, slow to get things done, or failed to consult brigades over matters that affected them . Middle managers are the interface between volunteer brigades and the publicly funded organisations of the fire agencies, and it is essential that they be selected and trained to manage volunteers and have adequate resources to fulfil the demands of their role efficiently.

Participant reports suggest the need for leadership development, particularly at the brigade and middle-management level, to minimise dysfunctional behaviour and cultivate improved morale and to improve the volunteering experience for a wider range of people.

NEED FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING OF MOTIVATIONS TO VOLUNTEER

Both serving and prospective recruits report their primary motivation for volunteering is to do something for the community and to make a difference. This is somewhat inconsistent with the reports of dysfunctional behaviour and the fact that many volunteers are more willing to undertake some tasks than others, regardless of necessity, suggesting that at least one of the primary motivations for volunteering has not been adequately captured in the studies undertaken to date. More implicit intrinsic motivations (of which the volunteer may be unaware) should be considered and altruistic motivations should be differentiated from self-enhancement motivations. A possible source of confusion in interpreting volunteer self-reports of their motivation to do something for the community is their confounding of two quite different underlying motivations, namely altruism and self-enhancement.

As well as providing fire agencies with an opportunity to appeal to the strongest motivations, a better understanding of intrinsic motivations, altruism and self-enhancement, may also increase understanding of some of the more dysfunctional aspects of volunteer behaviour (e.g. risk-taking).

HOST-COMMUNITY MISUNDERSTANDING ABOUT VOLUNTEERING

The data from respondents in rural communities who had never volunteered reveal surprisingly poor knowledge of the volunteer fire services in general. This poses a significant challenge to recruitment. Furthermore, as our research to date has focused on rural communities, it is prudent to assume that knowledge of the fire services is even weaker in urban fringe and suburban areas where land and fire are less prominent in daily life. The misunderstandings identified in the present report provide a strong basis for fire agencies to develop community education programs to raise awareness of volunteering opportunities.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Future research could take advantage of recent improvements in fire agency records and databases that allow a more accurate exploration of firefighter numbers, volunteers' capabilities, levels of participation and trends in these factors over time. There is also considerable scope for secondary analysis of the research databases compiled during the current projects.

POPULATION SUBGROUPS NOT ABLE TO BE INCLUDED IN THE PRESENT PROJECT

The information we obtained during our research indicates that youth (under 18 years), and culturally and linguistically diverse population subgroups, including Indigenous Australians, represent a potentially untapped volunteer resource and, as such, warrant targeted research.

CADETS AND VOLUNTEERS AGED UNDER 18

Considerable benefits may be realised by identifying ways of ensuring that firefighters who leave when they reach the young-adult ages associated with high mobility, transfer to brigades in their new locations or rejoin as fire service volunteers if they later return to a community with a volunteer brigade.

CULTURALLY DIVERSE GROUPS

Fire agencies may benefit from research identifying the barriers and incentives affecting recruitment from immigrant groups, and further analysis is required to explore the underlying reasons for the low participation by particular ethnic groups.

Fire agencies may benefit from research identifying the barriers and incentives affecting recruitment from Indigenous Australians. Higher proportions of Indigenous Australians live in regional areas and they are also comparatively young (median age of 21 years compared with 46 years for the total population).

LEADERSHIP AND RETENTION OF VOLUNTEERS

Dissatisfaction with the volunteering experience is a significant contributor to resignations, resulting from conflict, factionalism, exclusion, discrimination and bullying, autocratic leadership, favouritism or incompetence. Good leadership and management would help to prevent behavioural problems among volunteers and reduce turnover of membership. Further research is required to identify means of ensuring a high quality of brigade leadership, supported by quality district managers and career firefighters.

THREATS TO FUTURE VOLUNTEER NUMBERS

There is a pressing need for further research to investigate the likely trends in volunteer capacity and the mechanisms underlying such trends, in particular to obtain a better understanding of the impact of future post-compulsory education participation rates on volunteer numbers.

HEALTH RISKS AND FITNESS FOR DUTY OF OLDER VOLUNTEERS

Further research is required to investigate and manage the rising age profile of volunteer firefighters for possible health risk to themselves and any compromising of the effectiveness of the fire service.

RECRUITING YOUNGER VOLUNTEERS

There is evidence that economic trends, particularly casualisation of the workforce and increased participation in education, are making it increasingly difficult for young adults to volunteer as firefighters. Further research is required to understand the impact of these trends, particularly the apparent relationship between higher education and the lack of younger volunteers, so as to guide policy enabling more young adults to volunteer.

VOLUNTEERS FOR NON-OPERATIONAL AND INCIDENT-MANAGEMENT ROLES

The research suggests there is an untapped resource of people who are interested in volunteering for non-firefighting roles which might include logistical support and roles in incident management teams. With the increasing likelihood of multiple large fires occurring under extreme fire weather conditions, there is a pressing need for research into the recruitment of surge volunteers to take such key roles in major fires.

SUPPORT FOR EMPLOYERS AND SELF-EMPLOYED VOLUNTEERS

Further research is required into options for compensation of employers and self-employed volunteers who carry an unreasonable or disproportionate financial impost because of their generosity or sense of duty.

UNDERLYING MOTIVATIONS OF VOLUNTEERS

Further research could determine the true motivations of volunteer firefighters; in particular, motivations associated with altruism, self-enhancement, and a sense of personal agency, potency or self-efficacy need to be differentiated and explored in depth. The self-report surveys and other methodologies used in this project have limitations in distinguishing altruistic motivations from self-oriented motivations.

THE PERCEIVED BUREAUCRATIC NATURE OF THE FIRE AGENCIES

Given the most strongly endorsed obstacle to volunteering was the perceived bureaucratic nature of the fire agencies, further research is recommended to examine what volunteers find so frustrating and identify ways of minimizing their burden while still meeting the obligations of the fire agencies.

LINKS BETWEEN BRIGADES AND THEIR HOST COMMUNITIES

A rural community survey revealed a surprising absence of understanding of fire services and of the role of brigade members. This situation may be even more prevalent in urban fringe and outer suburban areas where land and fire figure less prominently in the daily lives of most residents. In order to investigate the extent of such misunderstandings and inform the development of adequate community education programs, research is first needed to identify the nature of the links between brigades and their host communities.

CONCLUSION

The Bushfire CRC Volunteerism Project has conducted the most comprehensive research in Australia to date on ways of enhancing the recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters. The research further confirms past research that links the decline in volunteer firefighter numbers with many of the economic policy reforms that have occurred since the 1970s. It is beyond the capability of fire agencies to influence on-going economic changes or the economic reform agenda, which leaves them with a limited range of options to maintain adequate numbers of volunteers.

The options identified by the Volunteerism Project can be summarised as making fire service volunteering feasible and appealing to a wider range of people. Our survey of community members who had never volunteered indicated that a relatively small proportion of the population are interested in firefighting, and only a fraction of those feel they are likely to do so at any point in time. Careful refinements to equipment, vehicles, protective clothing and other facilities could make firefighting more feasible to people who lack the traditionally high strength and fitness requirements. Improvements to the organisational climate in some brigades, and to the quality of brigade leadership and management, may make brigades more welcoming for a more diverse range of people. More flexible arrangements for training and assessments may enable shift workers and people who are present in a community during business hours to participate more easily.

The research has touched on a wide range of issues through studies involving most of the key stakeholder groups including the families and employers of volunteers, potential volunteers, recent recruits and ex-volunteers. The findings suggest many initiatives that fire agencies could take and expose issues that are worthy of more detailed examination.

The Integrative Summary of the Research, of which the present report is a synopsis, provides much greater detail about the findings and contains an appendix listing many initiatives taken by fire agencies during the seven years of the Volunteerism Project. Time-series data on volunteer numbers from CFA suggest that the long term decline in volunteer numbers was arrested during the Project; however, more work is required to generate growth. Total numbers are not sufficient to assure the community that the fire services have the right people available in the right place at the right time for an effective service.