


Human Health and Social Impacts Node

Identifying the impacts of climate change on mental health and wellbeing of vulnerable populations



A clear differentiation and typology of the mental health and wellbeing impacts of climate change is needed. Without such a typology our capacity to develop policies and pathways for increasing adaptability and resilience is compromised.

Previous research from the Human Health and Social Impacts Node has indicated elevated psychological morbidity (such as depression and anxiety) six months following devastating flooding, with greater impact on marginalised populations. We have also identified extreme stress among emergency service workers and volunteers following events including bushfire. Impacts of extreme climate events on mental health and wellbeing are broad and dependent on the type of event. The impacts may be made worse geographically and/or socially.

A multi-sectoral agency approach using systems-level action is useful to promote flexibility in meeting the needs of community members according to their vulnerability. For health systems,

this includes empowering people (particularly those disproportionately affected) to design strategies that mitigate their risks from climate-related events, moving beyond individual behavioural change to group-level strategies that build social capital and resilience. For example, community development approaches have promoted social cohesion and wellbeing and moderated the mental health impacts of persistent drought.

The outputs from this study will be a typology of the mental health and wellbeing impacts of climate change, and a review and prioritisation of the mechanisms by which joint action might enhance adaptability and resilience among vulnerable populations in rural NSW.

Research outcomes

- A literature review identifying the mental health impact of climate change (and the development of a typology from this review) and how intersectoral capacity might be built to support the enhancement of adaptability and resilience of vulnerable populations in rural NSW.
- Consultation and engagement workshops with rural communities across NSW (Lismore, Orange and Broken Hill). The goal of these workshops is to get feedback on the literature review and identify community priorities for action.
- A policy brief for state and federal government, with a focus on policy options for supporting action by state and local governments, community groups, non-governmental organisations and academia.

Who will use this information?

- NSW State, regional and local Government including Office of Emergency Management, NSW Department of Justice, NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment, NSW Rural Assistance Authority, NSW Department of Industry, Department of Primary Industries
- Local Health Districts
- Primary Health Networks
- Emergency services e.g. SES, RFS
- Non-governmental organisations e.g. Red Cross
- Business Chambers
- Researchers

Human Health and Social Impacts Node

Building on current sources of health and climate change information, the Human Health and Social Impacts Node supports the NSW Government by:

1. delivering robust, sector-specific information targeting the health system, vulnerable communities and government agencies
2. establishing baselines for monitoring, evaluation and analysis of adaptation programs that seek to protect and promote health, and strengthen the delivery of health services, in the face of a changing climate
3. improving understanding of vulnerability in the context of exposure, sensitivity and adaptive capacity
4. providing practical information on building resilience in communities and in the health sector.

The work program of the Node is informed by eco-social understandings of relationships between climate change and health. The approach taken acknowledges the range of environmental, social and economic consequences of climate change, including regional variation in impacts and vulnerability.

The Node is a partnership between:

- **NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment**
- **University of Sydney**
- **NSW Health**

For more information:

Dr Sinead Boylan | Executive Officer Human Health and Social Impacts Node

E sinead.boylan@sydney.edu.au

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Department of Planning, Industry and Environment, Locked Bag 5022, Parramatta NSW 2124. Phone: 1300 361 967 (environment and national parks enquiries); email: info@environment.nsw.gov.au; website: www.environment.nsw.gov.au.

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