

## Research Summary

### The ongoing experiences of students following the Hazelwood mine fire

March 2019



## Background

### Analysis aims

This study assessed the psychological impacts of six weeks of exposure to smoke and ash from the Hazelwood mine fire on school-aged children. The study compared students from schools in the most exposed community (Morwell) with those from schools elsewhere in the Latrobe Valley which were less exposed to the smoke event.

The fire in the Morwell open cut brown coal mine adjacent to the Hazelwood Power Station blanketed the town of Morwell and the surrounding area in smoke and ash for six weeks in February and March 2014. The smoke event was recognised as one of the most significant air quality incidents in Victoria's history, with the concentration of smoke contaminants reaching high levels.

The smoke event caused considerable community concern within Morwell and the broader community. In response to these concerns, and following extensive community consultation, the Hazelwood Health Study (HHS) was established to examine the impacts of the mine fire. The HHS involves multiple research streams targeting different health outcomes and different vulnerable groups.



### Meet the team

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## What we found

The interviews revealed that for most students, their recall of the event was vivid, with students recalling feeling anxious or sick at the time; disruption of routines and relocation of home or school; some relief from sharing the experience with friends or family; and being confined to indoors or trips away from the smoke. While the majority of the participants reported little to no ongoing concerns, some did express current concerns. The need to move on from the event was clearly expressed, however, for some students this was challenging, with thoughts of the event rekindled by anniversaries, media reports, and smoke in the air. In particular, some students reported experiencing key symptoms of distress associated with the event such as dreaming about the event, feeling more restless, or trying to avoid thinking about it by distracting themselves with other activities. Students remarked on a number of things that helped them at the time, highlighting the important role that family, friends, and school personnel played in supporting them. With regards to preparing for and responding to future events, students remarked on the need for clearer communication with them on the nature of the event and potential impacts, and what they can do to look after themselves and their families.

A more detailed report describing the findings from this analysis can be found at <http://hazelwoodhealthstudy.org.au/study-findings/study-reports/>



## What we did

This analysis is focused on the second round of face to face interviews completed in 2017 by 46 students in grades 5, 7, and 9. The students were primarily from Morwell schools and had completed a similar interview in 2015. This allowed us to explore the impacts of the event more deeply.



## Where to from here

This research comprises one aspect of the HHS Psychological Impacts stream. Future activities for this stream include follow up surveys and interviews with school-aged children and adults.

**The Hazelwood Health Study is a collaborative program of research led by the Monash University Schools of Public Health and Preventative Medicine and Rural Health in partnership with Federation University, the Menzies Institute for Medical Research at the University of Tasmania, the University of Adelaide and the CSIRO.**

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## Considerations

While all attempts were made to recruit as many students as possible into the Schools Study, the majority of eligible families did not respond to the invitation to participate. Older students were also less likely to participate than their younger counterparts, due in part to there being only one secondary school in Morwell. Finally, the random sample used for the interviews may have restricted the range of possible responses. This raises the possibility that the participant samples for the survey and interviews may not represent the full student population at the time.

