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Conceptualising household and neighbourhood safety from wildfire in Australia

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In Australia, programs to increase community preparedness and self-reliance are an increasing feature of attempts to deal with the risk of bushfire. Termed the 'community safety' approach it represents a recent, significant shift in emergency management. Yet there is little understanding of whether and how these programs work, and the settings where they work best. This paper outlines aspects of the first stage of the development of a comprehensive framework and methodology for evaluating community safety programs using a program theory approach.

The broader research program is a component of the Bushfire CRC, an initiative to foster research on a range of bushfire related issues. The development of a community safety evaluation framework represents an important opportunity to apply current evaluation theory and practice within this emerging field.

The first part of the paper describes Trochim's structured concept mapping procedure and how it was used in eleven workshops across Australia to identify fifteen broad concepts that identify the changes or improvements community members and fire agency personnel believe need to occur to make households and neighbourhoods safer from bushfire. Following the workshops, additional statistical analysis was carried out, enabling more accurate representation of the relationships between the identified concepts. A synthesis of individual workshop results yielded the fifteen broad concepts.

Finally, an interpretative phase created two models of community safety outcomes that will provide the basis for subsequent program planning and evaluation tasks. The first model was derived directly from the fifteen concepts and yielded an outcomes hierarchy for community safety programs. The second model involved as realist reconceptualisation of the fifteen concepts along with a reanalysis of the more detailed data from individual workshops. This resulted in a representation of possible mechanisms and outcomes within a three-level (household, locality/community, agency) view of the implementation context of community safety initiatives.