



Gender & Disaster Australia

# Towong

DISASTER CONTEXT

Socio-demographics from  
a gendered perspective





# Towong Shire



Map of Towong Shire. Source: <https://abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/LGA26670>





## INTRODUCTION

The Local Government Area (LGA) of Towong, also known as Towong Shire, is in the north-east of Victoria, on the border with New South Wales and the banks of the Murray River. The risk of flood in the Upper Murray region is high when there is heavy rainfall, when snow melts quickly from nearby snowfields in both New South Wales and Victoria, and when water is released from the Khancoban Pondage, part of the Snowy Hydro Scheme.<sup>1</sup> In 2010 and 2012, there were notable floods in the Towong Shire, centred on the town of Walwa.

However, the most significant disaster impact on the Towong Shire has come in the form of bushfire. In January and February 2003, the north east of Victoria was engulfed by fire, with over a million hectares burned. The areas most affected by the fires were the North East and Gippsland regions, and the Towong Shire was one of the four worst affected Shires.<sup>2</sup> The social impacts of the 2003 bushfires were the subject of a research report conducted by academics at the Centre for Regional and Rural Development at RMIT University. The study found a range of socioeconomic impacts to the region from the bushfires, including:

- Marked drain on physical, social, and psychological health as a result of the hyper-alertness that was required for up to 20 nights of preparing for possible fires
- Respiratory conditions exacerbated by smoke and haze

- Considerable disruption to family life and social links, including children being evacuated while parents stayed to protect homes
- Local communities felt isolated and government assistance was sometimes regarded by locals as inappropriate
- Financial losses to families who lost income during the fires and in the weeks following
- Divisions within communities where there were perceptions that some families, properties, and businesses were given priority service
- Celebrations of the way communities worked together
- Antipathy towards 'green' politics and conservationism
- Negative impacts of a sensationalist media presence heightening sense of panic
- Long-term economic loss to the Towong LGA of \$11.7 million

In the Black Summer of 2019-2020, Towong was affected by bushfires once again. Corryong, one of the larger townships in Towong but nonetheless a small township with a population of 1,352,<sup>3</sup> was encircled by the Upper Murray bushfire and cut off from all communications and transport for 4-5 days.<sup>4</sup> The only two roads into Corryong were closed for three weeks after the fires, delaying the arrival of support, and the initial recovery hub was located in Tallangatta, requiring people to travel long distances for support - as far as Albury, two hours away, for generators.<sup>5</sup>

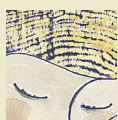
1 <https://www.ses.vic.gov.au/documents/8655930/9320199/Upper+Murray+Local+Flood+Guide.pdf/f1383116-8079-20d4-e433-e800cc3b5733?t=1620860427194>

2 Gangemi, M., Martin, J., Marton, R., Phillips, S., & Stewart, M. (2003). A report on the socio-economic impact of bushfires on rural communities and local government in Gippsland and north east Victoria. Melbourne, VIC: RMIT Centre for Regional and Rural Development. Available at: <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2003-01/apo-nid163291.pdf>

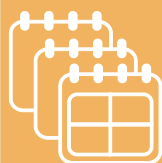
3 <https://abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/SAL20648>

4 <https://www.towong.vic.gov.au/repository/libraries/id:2cvu1xfyg1cxby8c14xc/hierarchy/Bushfire%20Recovery/Municipal%20Recovery%20Plan/municipal-recovery-plan.pdf>

5 <https://www.cpaaustralia.com.au/-/media/project/cpa/corporate/documents/policy-and-advocacy/consultations-and-submissions/cross-policy/pre-2021/bushfire-recovery-lesson-submission.pdf?rev=5ed2953b4724421487e5bc50cc404c84>



This need to spend recovery funds intended for Corryong and the Towong Shire in other areas meant that the funds ultimately benefited LGAs that were not bushfire-affected.<sup>6</sup> Some of these issues echoed the concerns expressed in the RMIT University report into the socioeconomic impacts of the 2003 bushfires, for example that there was a disjunction between centralised support provision and local implementation, and that an LGA with a population as small as Towong's would struggle financially over the course of a long-term recovery.



## DISASTER BACKGROUND

*Kind of disasters affecting this region/town:* Bushfire, flood

EVENT NAME	Hazard Type(s)
Black Summer bushfires, 2019-2020 <sup>7</sup>	Bushfire
Walwa flood, 2012 <sup>8</sup>	Flood
Jingellic and Walwa floods, 2010 <sup>9</sup>	Flood
Gippsland and North East bushfires, 2003 <sup>10</sup>	Bushfire

*Recent major disaster:* Black Summer bushfires, 2019-2020<sup>11</sup>

- Fatalities: 5 total, 0 in Towong
- People displaced:<sup>12</sup>
  - o At the peak of the bushfire, the Corryong relief centre housed an estimated 1,000 people, including 600 who were evacuated there from a local music festival
  - o Two days later, after emergency services convoys allowed people to travel away from the area, the number of people housed at the relief centre decreased to 40

6 Ibid.

7 <https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/black-summer-bushfires-vic-2019-20/>

8 <https://www.ses.vic.gov.au/documents/8655930/9320199/Upper+Murray+Local+Flood+Guide.pdf/f1383116-8079-20d4-e433-e800cc3b5733?t=1620860427194>

9 <https://www.ses.vic.gov.au/documents/8655930/9320199/Upper+Murray+Local+Flood+Guide.pdf/f1383116-8079-20d4-e433-e800cc3b5733?t=1620860427194>

10 Gangemi, M., Martin, J., Marton, R., Phillips, S., & Stewart, M. (2003). A report on the socio-economic impact of bushfires on rural communities and local government in Gippsland and north east Victoria. Melbourne, VIC: RMIT Centre for Regional and Rural Development. Available at: <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2003-01/apo-nid163291.pdf>

11 Unless otherwise stated, information provided relates to impacts of the Black Summer bushfires on the LGA of Towong specifically and is sourced from: <https://www.towong.vic.gov.au/repository/libraries/id:2cvu1xfyg1cxby8c14xc/hierarchy/Bushfire%20Recovery/Municipal%20Recovery%20Plan/municipal-recovery-plan.pdf>

12 <https://naturaldisaster.royalcommission.gov.au/publications/html-report/chapter-12>



- Properties and infrastructure affected:
  - 32.7% of the Towong LGA was burned, representing 218,015 hectares of land, including 59,849 hectares of agricultural land
  - Critical fencing and farm infrastructure losses, including the loss of more than 3,200km of fencing and 6,300 head of stock within the Towong LGA
  - 38 primary residences destroyed; 60 homes in total were destroyed or damaged; 334 business buildings and community facilities were also destroyed or damaged
  - Other facilities that required repaid and/or rebuilding after the fire included the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning radio infrastructure and Air Services and Country Fire Authority radio infrastructure
  - More than 1,000 known registered Aboriginal heritage places were impacted
  - 436km of arterial roads closed
  - More than 300 intakes to a State government appointed mental health service for psychosocial support in the aftermath of the fires
  - Initial data suggested that the Towong Shire lost 30,000 visitors in the March 2020 quarter as a result of the bushfires, equating to economic losses as high as \$5 million; job losses and disruptions connected to this were estimated at 50 EFT
- Insurance statistics:
  - As of 28 May 2020, the Insurance Council of Australia estimated that the Black Summer bushfires generated approximately 3,050 insurance claims with estimated insured losses of approximately \$18.6 million; these figures relate to the whole of Victoria<sup>13</sup>
- Other notable facts:
  - The township of Corryong was isolated for 4-5 days during the bushfire, losing communications and transport access
  - In the aftermath community trauma and mental health issues were reported, particularly among young people
  - The small population of Towong Shire means that the local Council has a small rates base; this created considerable financial constraints on the Council to provide relief and recovery support while maintaining its regular obligations as an LGA<sup>14</sup>
  - Recovery work was significantly disrupted by the outbreak of COVID-19 and the introduction of Stage 3 restrictions from April 2020



## ECONOMIC DISADVANTAGE

- Towong LGA is ranked:<sup>15</sup>
  - 341 out of 544 LGAs in Australia (where 1 is most disadvantaged)
  - in the 7th decile (out of 10, where 1 is most disadvantaged)
  - In the 63rd percentile (out of 100, where 1 is most disadvantaged)

<sup>13</sup> <https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/black-summer-bushfires-vic-2019-20/>  
<sup>14</sup> <https://www.towong.vic.gov.au/repository/libraries/id:2cvu1xfyg1cxby8c14xc/hierarchy/Bushfire%20Recovery/Municipal%20Recovery%20Plan/municipal-recovery-plan.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> This ranking comes from the ABS Local Government Area Indexes, available here: <https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/2033.0.55.0012016?OpenDocument>





## HOUSING AFFORDABILITY AND HOMELESSNESS

- Housing affordability in Towong:

	Towong LGA <sup>16</sup>	Victoria	Australia
Median mortgage repayments	\$1200/mth	\$1859/mth	\$1863/mth
Mortgage stress <sup>17</sup>	10.8%	15.5%	14.5%
Median rent payments	\$210/wk	\$370/wk	\$375/wk
Rental stress <sup>18</sup>	26.6%	30.9%	32.2%

- Homelessness<sup>19</sup>

- o In 2021-22, 48 people accessed Specialist Homelessness Services in the LGA of Towong, equating to 0.77% of the population, or 77 per 10,000
- o 22 of these were men (69 per 10,000) and 26 were women (85 per 10,000)



## MENTAL HEALTH

- Mental health conditions (any): Towong LGA: 10.1% | VIC: 8.8% | Aus: 8.8%<sup>20</sup>
- Suicide rates in Statistical Area 4 (SA4) Hume, in which the Towong LGA sits (2017-2021):<sup>21</sup>

Area	SA4 Hume	VIC	Australia
Age-standardised suicide rate per 100,000 population	15.6	10.5	12.6
Rate for males	25.8	16	19.2
Rate for females	5.6	5.3	6.1

<sup>16</sup> <https://abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/LGA26670>

<sup>17</sup> Refers to the percentage of households with mortgage repayments exceeding 30% of household income

<sup>18</sup> Refers to the percentage of households with rental payments exceeding 30% of household income

<sup>19</sup> Data cube: SHSC geographical location of client—LGA. Available here: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/shsc-data-cubes/contents/specialist-homelessness-services-collection-shsc-data-cubes>

<sup>20</sup> <https://abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/LGA26670>

<sup>21</sup> All suicide rate stats come from Data table: 2021 National Mortality Database - Suicide, Table NMD S10, available at: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/suicide-self-harm-monitoring/data/data-downloads>



## GENDER EQUALITY

- Lone parent status
  - o 9.8% one-parent families (VIC: 15.2%), of which 72.7% are female-led (VIC: 80.9)<sup>22</sup>
- Mothers' Index<sup>23</sup>
  - o Towong LGA ranked 53 out of 79 LGAs, where 1 is the best place in Victoria for a mother to live
- Unpaid work<sup>24</sup>
  - o Unpaid domestic work: 1,636 women did more than 5 hours of unpaid domestic work per week, compared to 1,164 men
  - o Unpaid care: 454 women provided unpaid assistance to a person with a disability, health condition, or due to old age, compared to 354 men
  - o Unpaid childcare: 683 women provided unpaid childcare, compared to 521 men
- Violence against women
  - o Sexual offences (14 recorded) and breaches of family violence orders (12 recorded) were the 4th and 5th most common offences recorded in the LGA of Towong in 2022<sup>25</sup>
  - o In 2022 there were 44 male alleged offenders and 15 female alleged offenders recorded; by contrast, there were 54 female victim reports and 37 male victim reports<sup>26</sup>
  - o Total family violence incidents were down 3.6% in 2022 in Towong from the previous year<sup>27</sup>

<sup>22</sup> <https://abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/LGA26670>

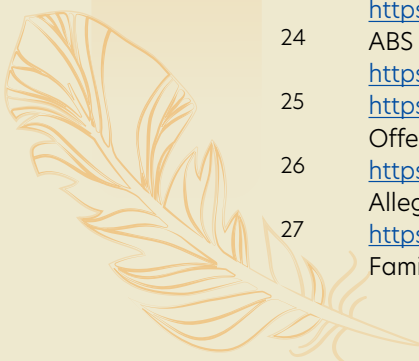
<sup>23</sup> The Mothers' Index consists of composite scores from five different indicators relating to maternal wellbeing (maternal health, children's wellbeing, educational status, economic status and socio-economic disadvantage), with each indicator given equal weighting. Scores were sorted from low to high and ranked from 1 to 79 (1 being the best place for a mother to live) to give the overall Mothers Index rank for each LGA in Victoria. Full table available at <https://apo.org.au/node/63692>, p. 31.

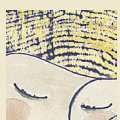
<sup>24</sup> ABS General Community Profile for LGA Towong, Tables G24-G26, available here: <https://abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/community-profiles/2021/LGA26670>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.crimestatistics.vic.gov.au/crime-statistics/latest-crime-data-by-area>, Offences Recorded Dashboard

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.crimestatistics.vic.gov.au/crime-statistics/latest-crime-data-by-area>, Alleged Offender Incidents Dashboard, Victim Reports Dashboard

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.crimestatistics.vic.gov.au/crime-statistics/latest-crime-data-by-area>, Family Violence Dashboard



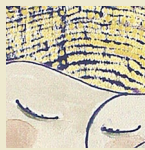
**DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION**

	LGA Towong <sup>28</sup>	Victoria	Australia
Median age	52	38	38
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	1.8%	1%	3.2%
Both parents born in Australia	71.5%	42.4%	45.9%
Non-English language used in household	3.5%	30.2%	24.8%
With university education	14%	29.2%	26.3%
Year 10 as highest qualification	11.6%	7.3%	10.0%
Labour force participation	56.3%	62.4%	61.1%
Working part-time	32.9%	32.3%	31.2%
Unemployment	3.5%	5%	5.1%
Median weekly personal income	\$689	\$803	\$805
Median weekly household income	\$1282	\$1759	\$1746
Rate of people on Disability Support Pension per 10,000 population (measured at LGA and state level) <sup>29</sup>	378	286	294

<sup>28</sup> <https://abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/LGA26670>

<sup>29</sup> <https://data.gov.au/data/dataset/dss-payment-demographic-data>; calculated by dividing number of DSP recipients listed in spreadsheet in footnote by population of LGA (<https://abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/LGA26670>) and state (<https://abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/2>), multiplied by 10,000





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