

Psychosocial Implications of Mega-Forest Fires on Chilean Firefighters: An Exploratory Analysis

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The mega-forest fires that occurred in the southern macro zone of Chile have challenged the coping capacities of the affected individuals and communities. In this sense, coping with a stressful event demands physical, cognitive, emotional and behavioral efforts (Harvey-Narváez et al, 2021), playing a crucial role in the management of internal and external demands that potentially affect people before, during and after the presentation of an emergency or disaster (Sandoval-Obando, 2019; Sandoval-Obando and Sandoval-Díaz, 2020). However, little research has been done on the implications of these events on the development (personal and professional) of firefighter personnel. The objective is to understand the psychological implications of mega forest fires on the mental health of firefighter volunteers in the commune of Purén (Chile). From a qualitative perspective (Nizama and Nizama, 2020), an exploratory, cross-sectional and non-experimental design was adopted, through a non-probabilistic purposive sampling, made up of 15 firefighter volunteers who were deployed during the mega forest fires that affected the commune of Purén (Chile). As for data collection, semi-structured in-depth interviews were used, whose data were interpreted using content analysis (Rincón et al., 2023), under semantic, thematic and repetition criteria.

Experiences (personal and professional) that occurred during potentially traumatic events were described, showing their different implications on the mental health of firefighters. Specifically, they evidenced a medium risk perception in the face of mega-forest fires, revealing the absence of institutional programs for the protection of their mental health and of suitable instruction and training programs to face disasters. In Chile, according to Astudillo, Ramos and Ramos (2018), firefighters' risk perception can be influenced by several factors such as the number of years of service, the educational level achieved, marital status or the support networks they have. Risk perception varies according to the type of firefighter who responds to fires, whether volunteer or paid (Cuevas, 2022). Finally, the importance of risk perception, social support and community resilience as relevant dimensions in disaster preparedness and response in Chile is discussed. In addition, the study offers a valuable and qualitatively situated understanding of the implications of mega-fires on the mental health of firefighters, becoming a reference point for future studies that address the different factors and dimensions that influence the management of mental health in emergency responders.

Keywords: mega-wildfires, mental health, risk perception, community resilience, social support, disasters.

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